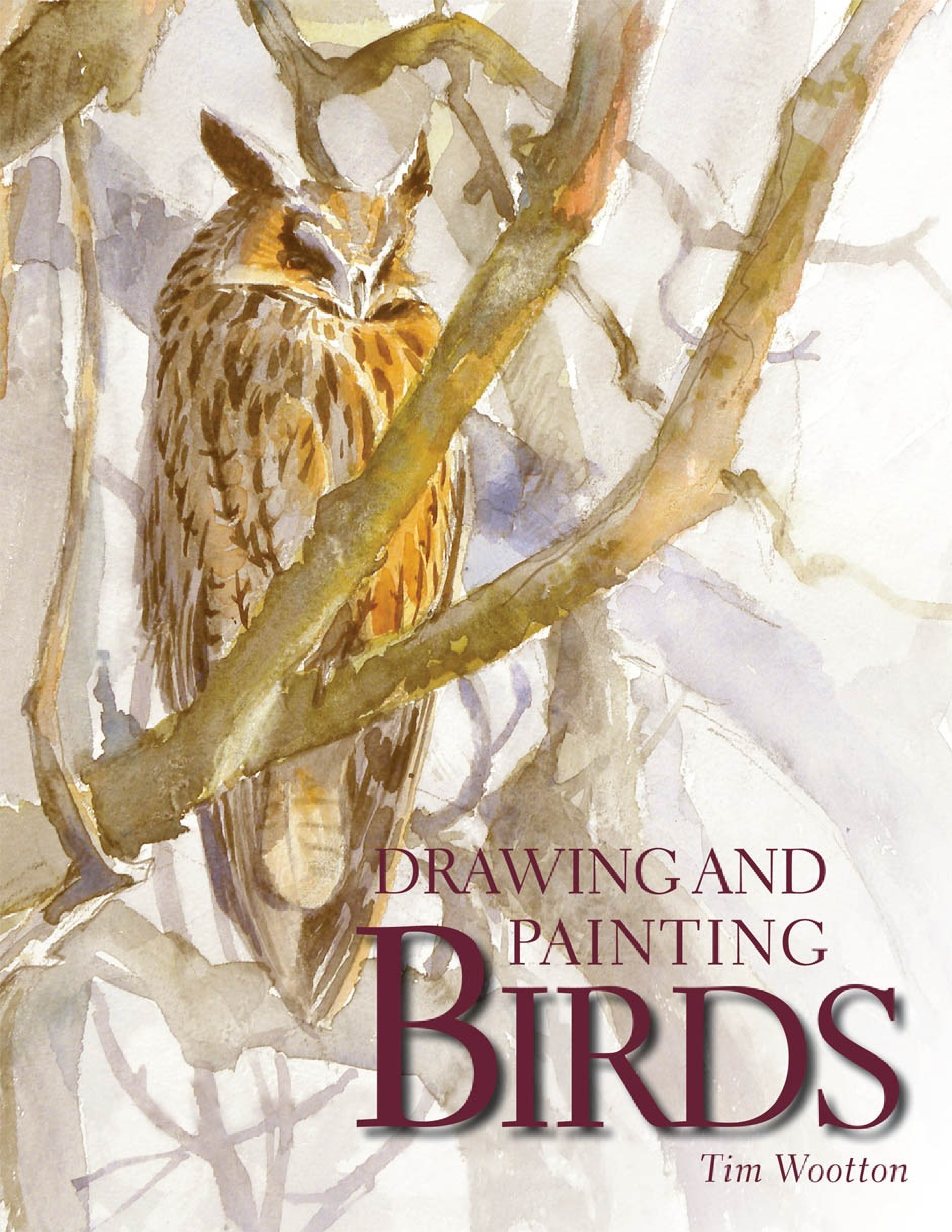
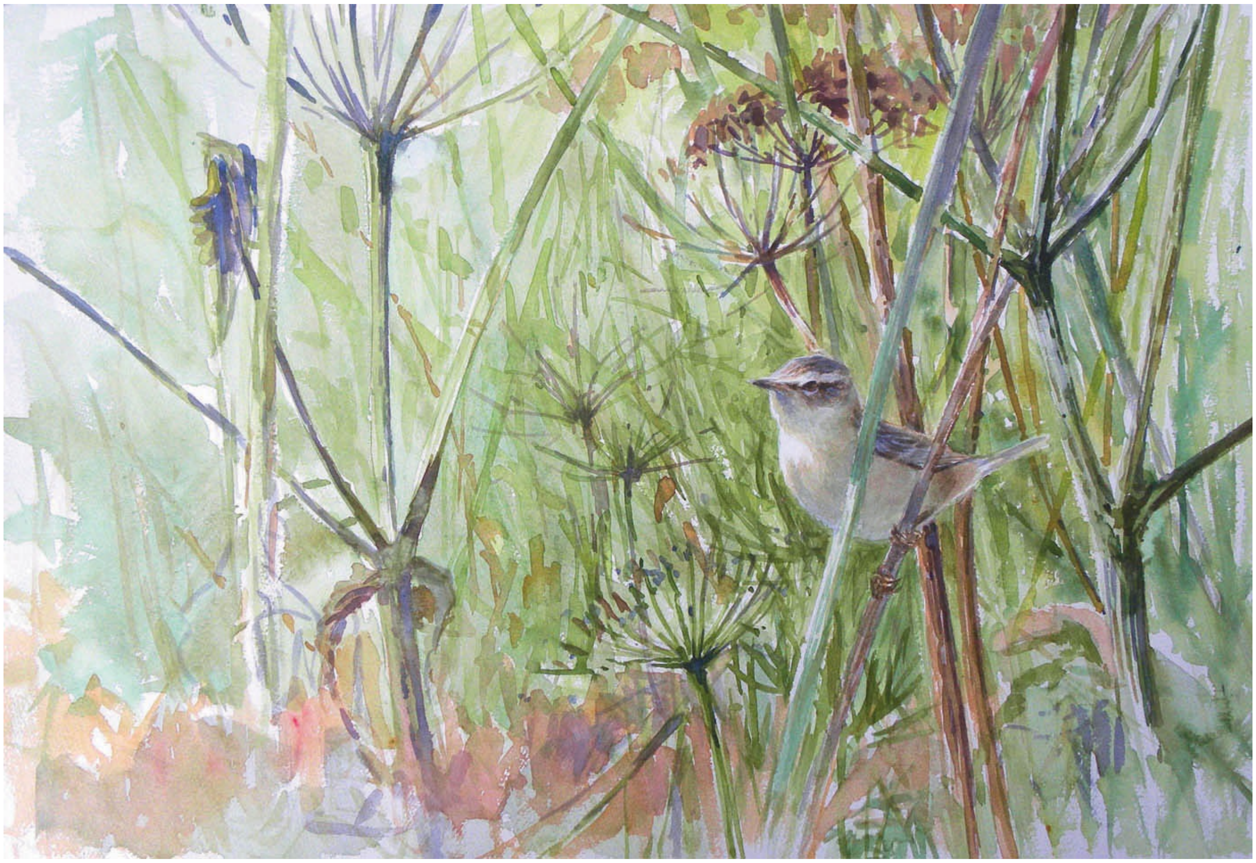


DRAWING AND PAINTING BIRDS

Tim Wootton



Tim Wootton: ***Sedge Warbler Hunting.***

DRAWING AND PAINTING BIRDS

Tim Wootton

THE CROWOOD PRESS

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Dedication

For Mum.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my unbridled gratitude to all the artists who provided such a sumptuous collection of work – indeed enough to fill at least another three volumes – which provided both regular entertainment and distraction from the task of writing as the visual delights teemed through my letterbox and populated my electronic mailbox. Although I would hope the reader finds some worth in the text, I have no doubt it will be the artwork of these wonderful people which will captivate most of all.

New acquaintances were made with personal heroes and old friendships were cemented during the many supportive emails and telephone calls which were a great help during the writing of the book. Mr John Busby offered quiet but sage advice and a gentle nod of approval when presented with my preliminary scrawling; international assistance flooded in from colleagues in America and Europe, and Nick Derry, John Threlfall, Paschalis Dougalis, Andy Ellis and Ed Keeble always made themselves available for comment and to offer moral support. Katrina van Grouw said all the right things at the important times, especially at the outset. Thanks all.

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My heartfelt appreciation and very special thanks to Sally for continually holding the family-fort during the not inconsiderable stresses of living with this fledgling author – she is definitely first in line if there are any medals to be handed out.

And my sincere apologies to anyone I may have inadvertently missed from this list.

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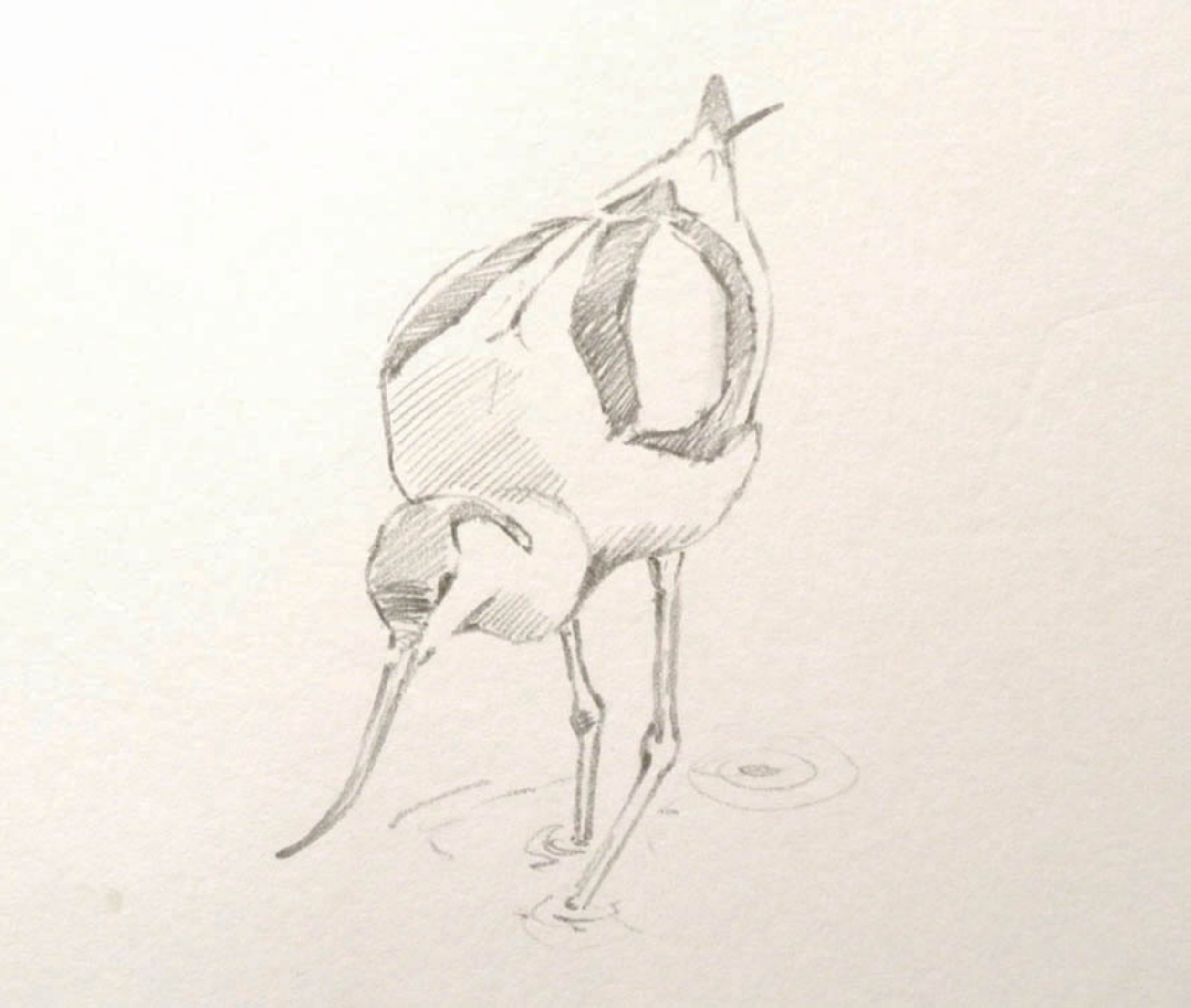


CHAPTER 1

WHY PAINT BIRDS?

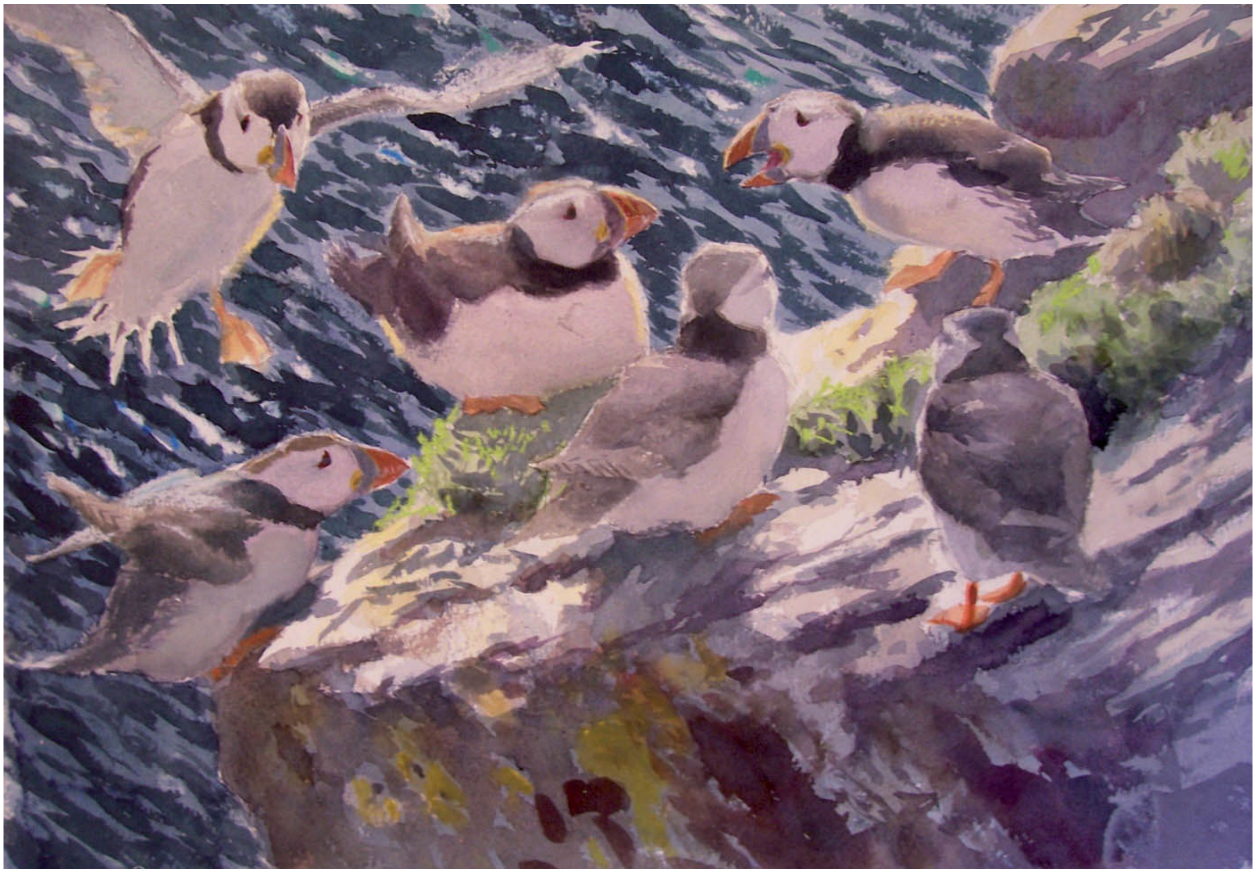
> The very idea of a bird is a symbol and a suggestion to the poet. A bird seems to be at the top of the scale, so vehement and intense his life … The beautiful vagabonds, endowed with every grace, masters of all climes, and knowing no bounds – how many human aspirations are realized in their free, holiday-lives – and how many suggestions to the poet in their flight and song!

John Burroughs

I hope you love birds too. It is economical. It saves going to heaven.

Emily Dickinson

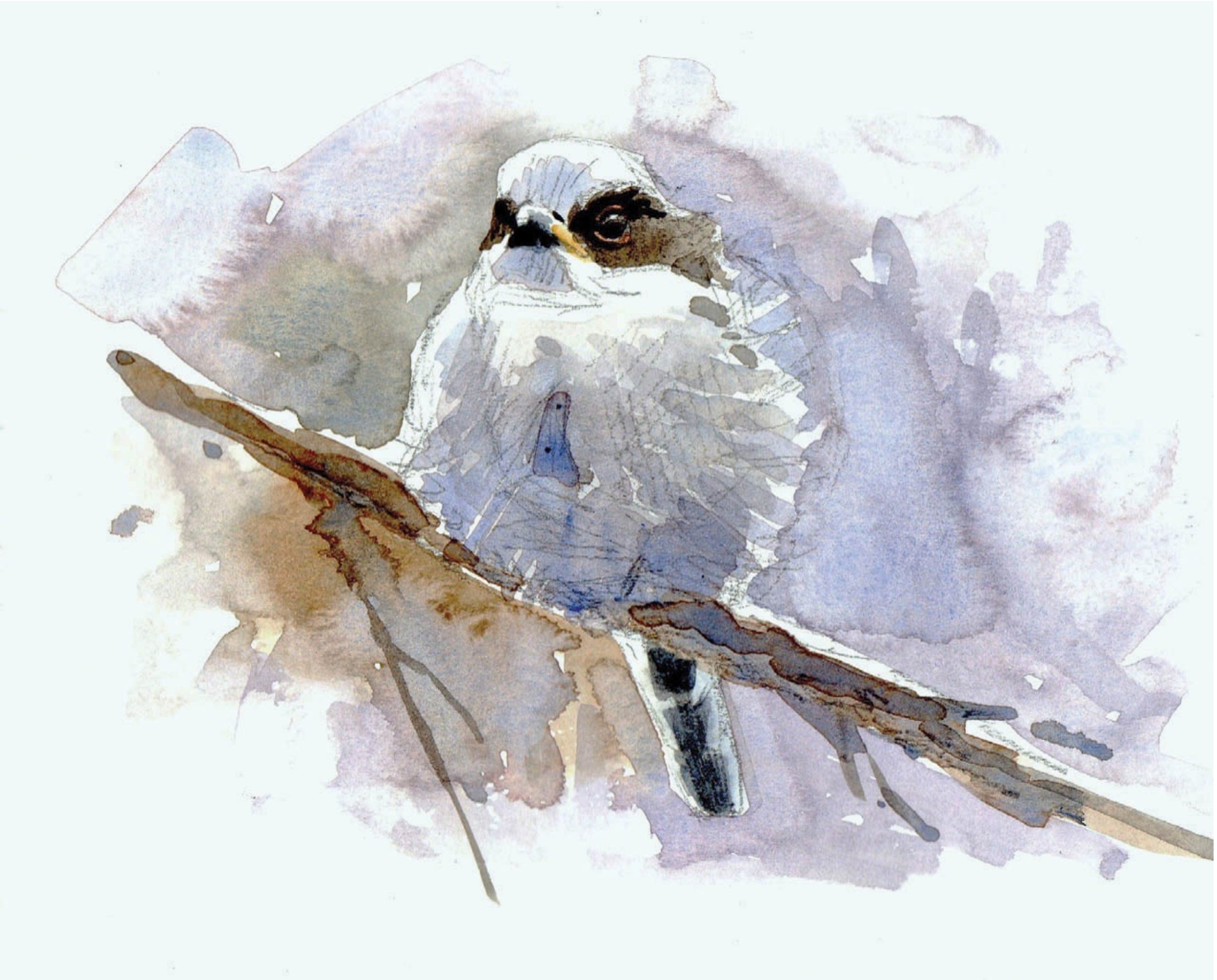
Of all our fellow inhabitants of planet Earth, birds are among the most admired, revered and envied. Birds have appeared in art for many thousands of years and our fascination with them continues. But what is it that draws us to paint the bird as a subject?



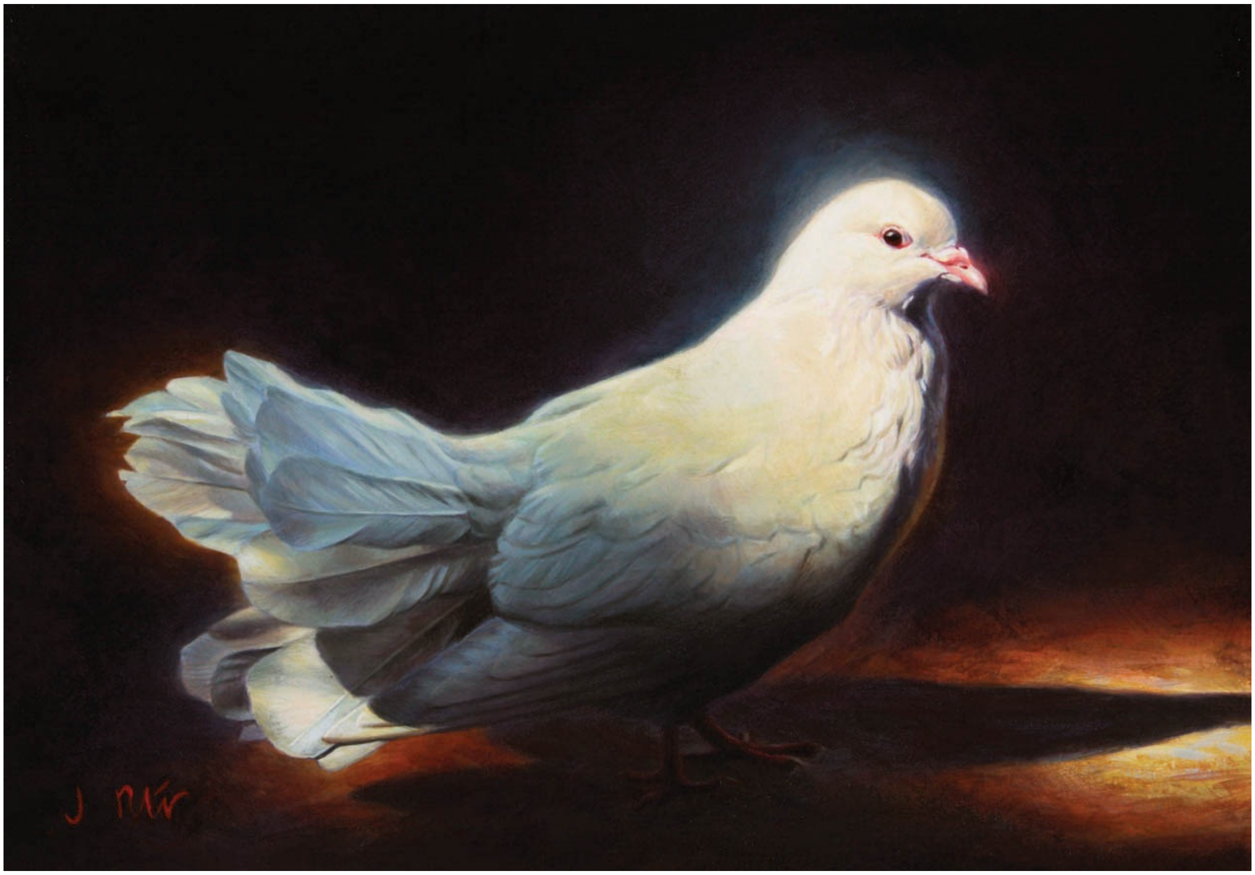
Tim Wootton: *Trouble at t’Mill*.

There are probably as many individual reasons for wanting to paint birds as there are individuals wishing to do so. They can be elegant and beautiful; they dazzle us with their aerial dexterity and fascinate us with their complex behaviour; and there is much else that appeals to us. My personal obsession with all things bird-related started when I was a very young lad, stumbling upon a grey, slightly pendulous ball – a moss and lichen construction, bound by gossamer and secreted in the spiny tangle of a bramble bush. Doing what boys did back in the dark ages, I squirmed my way through to see what was inside this tiny pouch. It was a long-tailed tit's nest and inside there happened to be baby long-tailed tits – seemingly dozens of them. I took one out of the nest and just looked at it, totally amazed at something so absolutely tiny and so perfectly finished, albeit tail-less. It had the cutest belligerence and from that moment I've been bird-mad.

If I'm ever asked what I was first, an artist or a birdwatcher, I'm really not sure. It has always seemed to be such a natural and obvious process for me to see something whilst out of doors and then to want to make a representation of that thing.



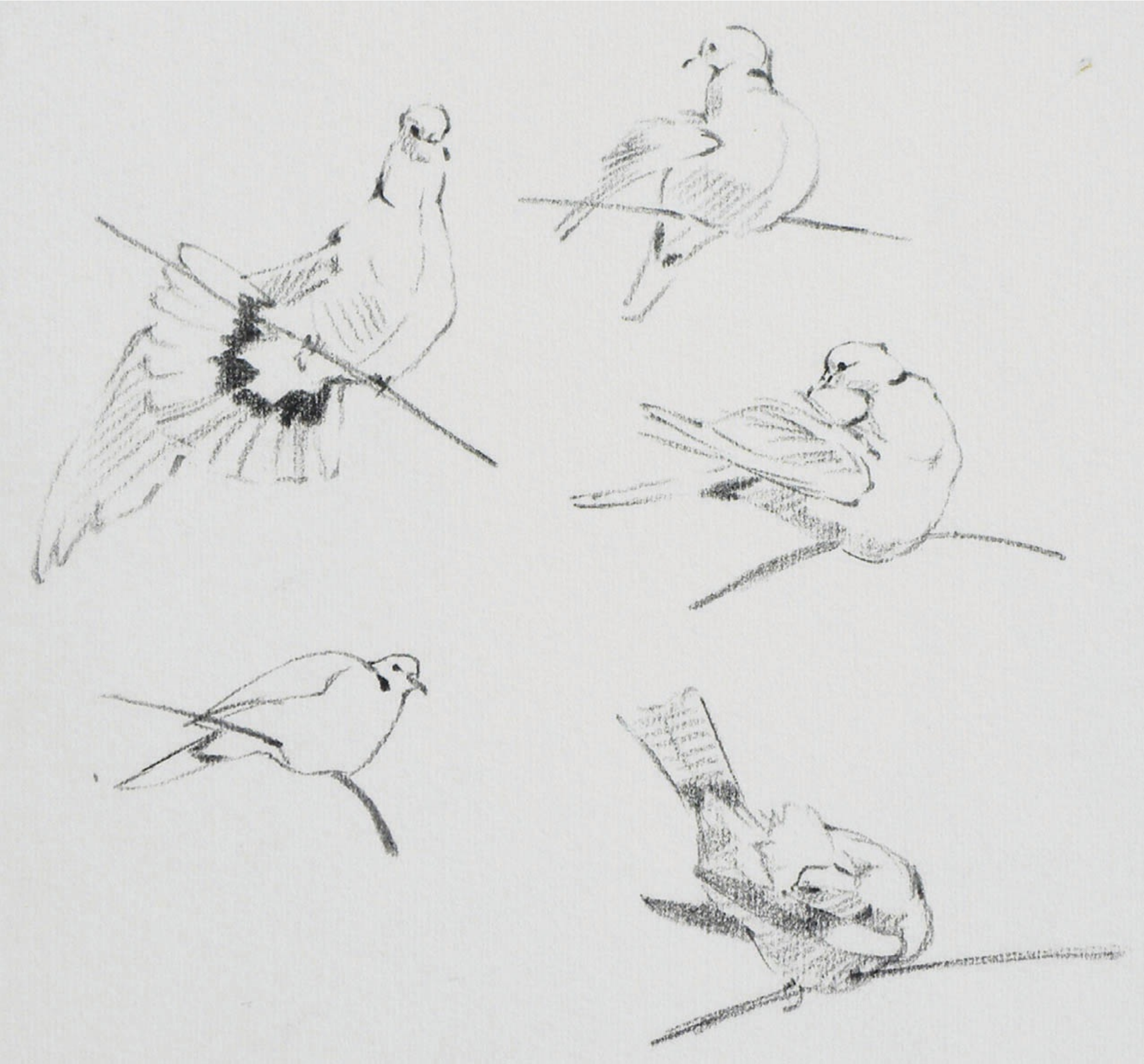
Tim Wootton: long-tailed tit.



Jonathan Pointer: white dove. Pigeons have been kept since medieval times for their eggs and their meat; much selective breeding has been undertaken to produce the fancy domestic types that are around today.

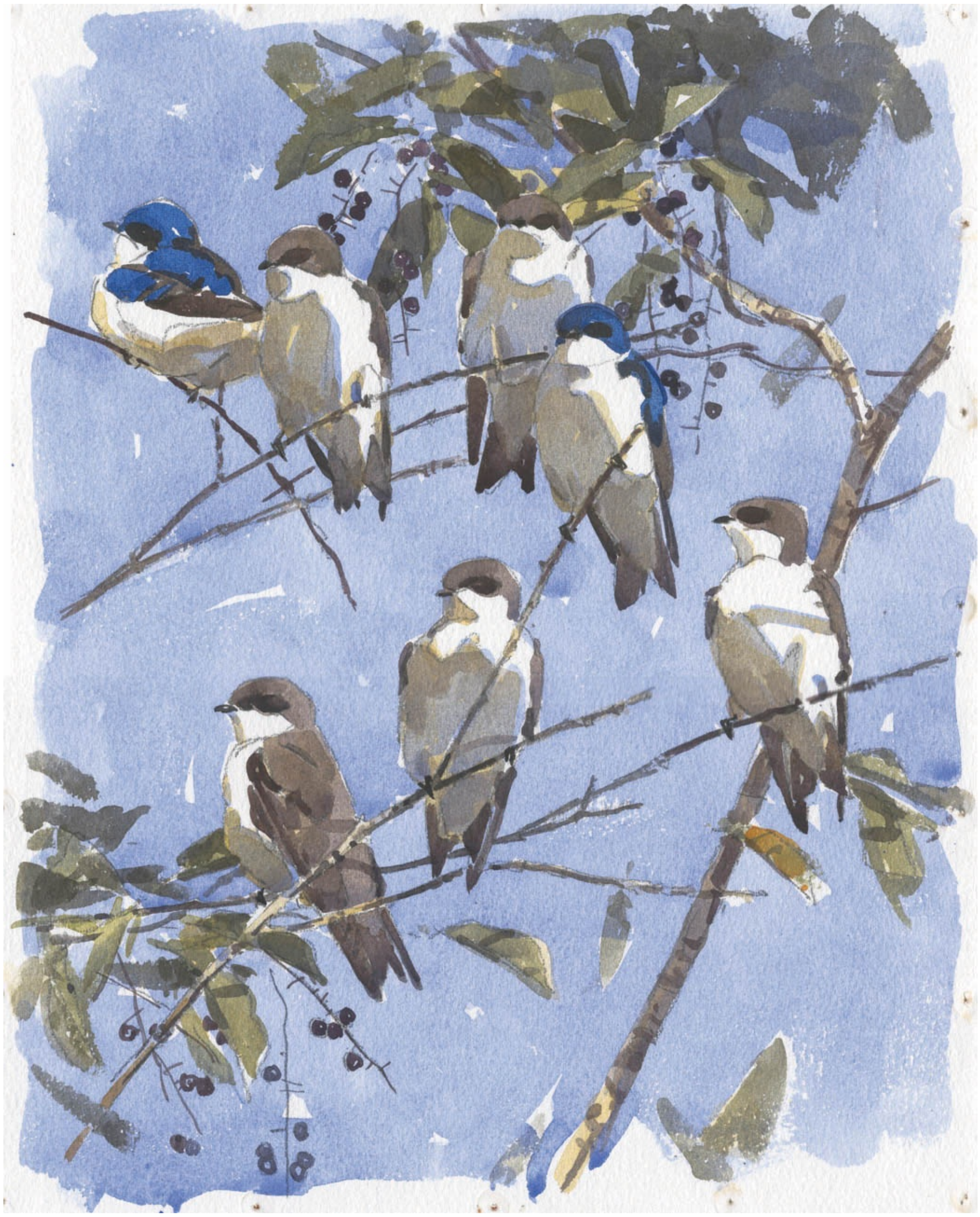
I appreciate that many others will come to drawing and painting birds from a different perspective. You could already be an experienced artist looking to expand your portfolio; perhaps you’re a birdwatcher wishing to increase your enjoyment of your hobby; or maybe you’ve just had one of those moments of revelation, something akin to my childhood experience with a nestful of baby long-tailed tits.

I remember working as a volunteer warden for the RSPB at Loch Garten in the highlands of Scotland. The job of the volunteers was to mount a twenty-four-hour vigil on the osprey’s nest, in case of attack from egg-thieves. But another aspect of the job was to help visitors to the nature reserve locate the ospreys whenever the birds returned from a fishing trip. We had remote cameras overlooking the nest and images were relayed back to the Visitor Centre, which people would watch. But after a few minutes of looking at a TV screen with an osprey just lying there, gasping in the sun or more often hunkered down against the wind and rain, people would get bored and wander around. But whenever a bird came in carrying a fish – well, that was a different story. Some would rush for binoculars and telescopes; others would crowd around the screen and watch the fish being fed to the chicks and almost immediately afterwards there would be a surge towards the RSPB membership recruitment desk. They had caught the birding bug!



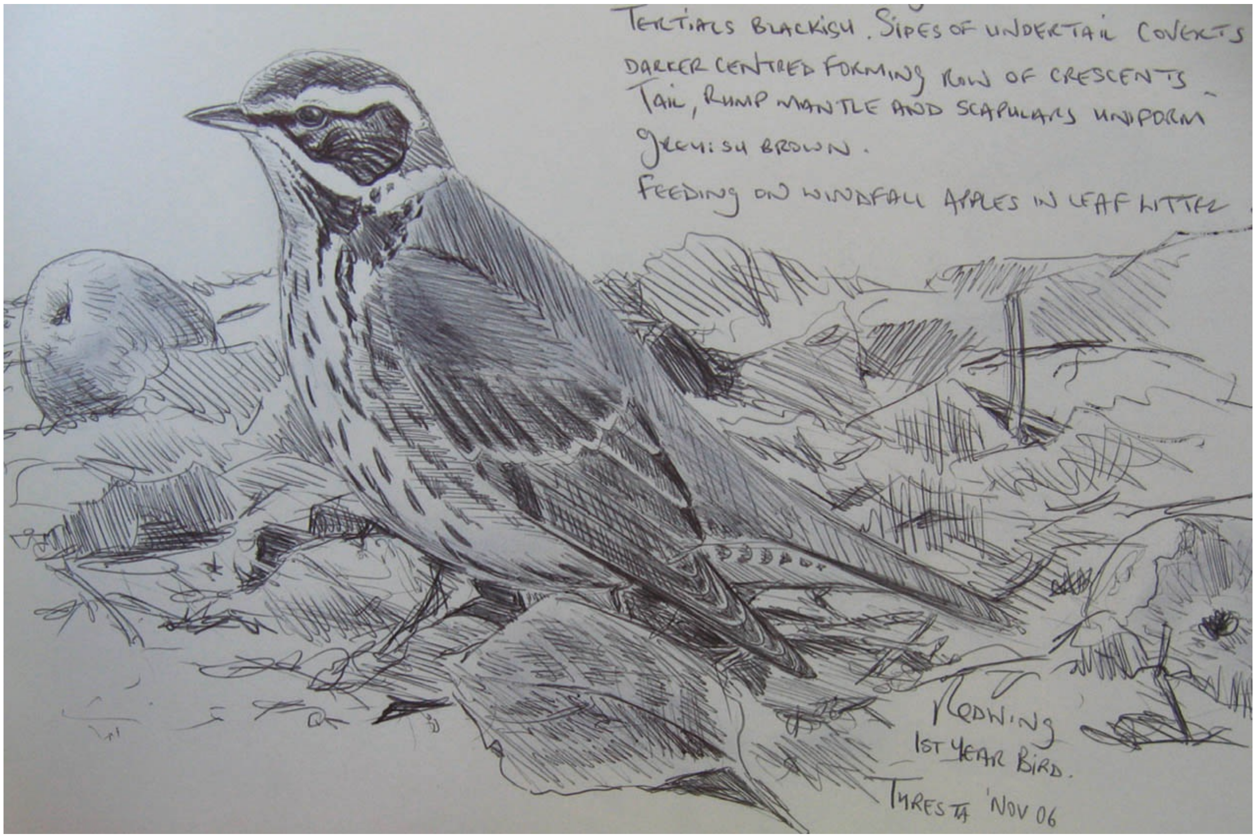
John Busby: studies of collared doves. Drawings made from the

John Busby: studies of collared doves. Drawings made from the living bird as it preens and stretches during its afternoon toilet. A passionate and knowledgeable birder, John views the subject from the artist's perspective, approaching landscapes and writing with the same verve and enthusiasm he brings to his birds. Everything about his drawings is perfectly balanced and beautifully formed.



Barry Van Dusen: *Tree Swallows in a Cherry Tree*. Familiar birds in the United States, tree swallows are similar to European house

martins. House martins live in very close proximity to man, building nests of mud under house eaves, and tree swallows will regularly use nest boxes; they share the same local environments as us.


TERTIALS BLACKISH. SIDES OF UNDERTAIL COVERTS
DARKER CENTRED FORMING ROW OF CRESCENTS –
TAIL, RUMP MANTLE AND SCAPULARS UNIFORM
GREYISH BROWN.
FEEDING ON WINDFALL APPLES IN LEAF LITTER.
REDWING
1ST YEAR BIRD.
THRESTA 'NOV 06

Alan Dalton: juvenile redwing. A field drawing made in biro with written notes describing various aspects of plumage detail. An exceptionally gifted artist, Alan is in the 'birder-artist' camp and is fascinated by bird study as a science.

So whatever your personal motivation to embark upon this path there is no doubt that it will be a real voyage of discovery, not without its tribulations and frustrations but, as with all things meaningful, the pain will blend with the pleasure and with practice and a decent measure of determination, you will succeed. And I don't think there could be any more worthwhile way of spending time than with nature, and with art.

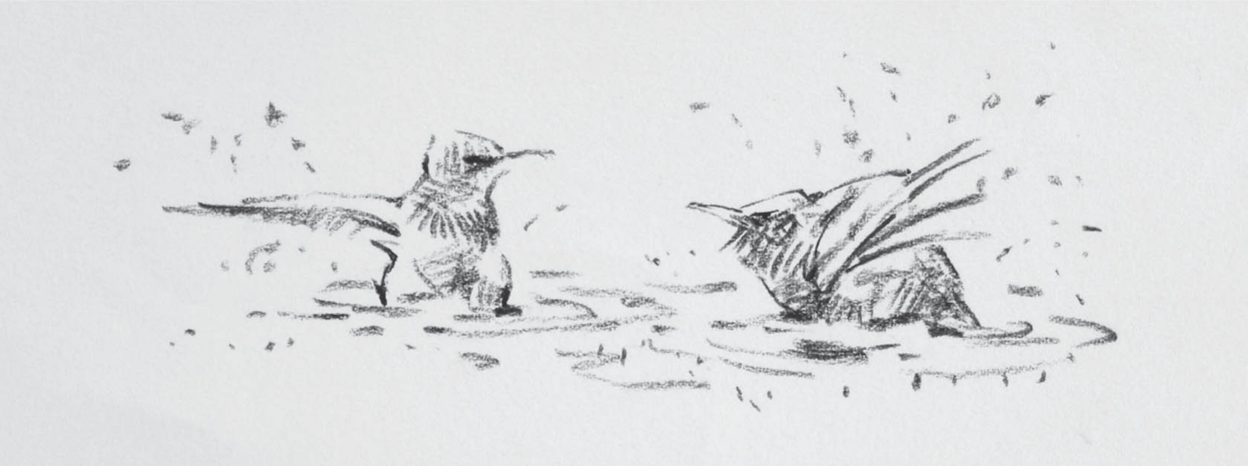
It is a curious thing, this 'bird art': the more you do it, the more it draws you in. It can reveal intoxicating insights, such as the iridescence of a starling's plumage, or the unexpected aerial brilliance of a house sparrow in pursuit of a small white butterfly, hovering and somersaulting in such a way as to make it seem completely unrelated to that dumpy, chirrupy finch that bounces about around the bread on your garden lawn. (Even that most basic assumption that it's a sparrow is now repudiated: apparently it's actually a member of the weaver finch family and not a true 'sparrow' at all.) But one thing about trying to draw birds is it makes you look; and the more you look the more you see.

Once captivated by the birds, whichever way it happens, other strange things may start to occur. You'll find you want to see a bit more, and in greater detail, because when the collared dove stretches its neck back and lifts its tail, what is it actually doing? And what's really going on when the ducks at the local park stretch one wing out (they seem to do it on one leg)? In fact, you start to watch birds and, in all probability, just about everything else around you too. Soon you may find yourself borrowing a pair of binoculars, which leads to buying a pair (as they allow you to see so much more of the birds' private lives), and before long your friends and family start calling you a 'twitcher'. You may not be a twitcher, but you will have become a birdwatcher.

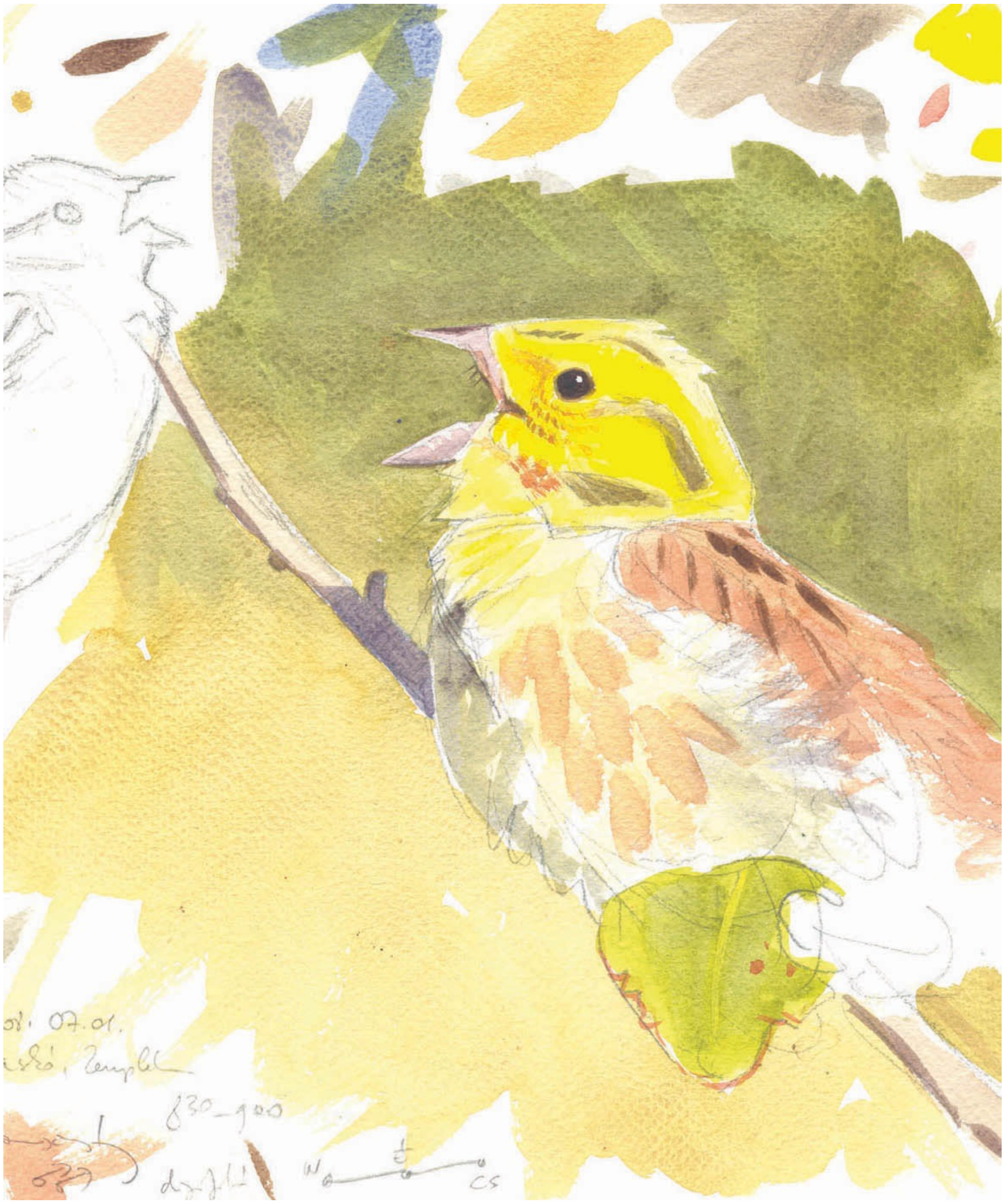
You may start out as someone wishing to make some pretty pictures with birds on them, but the chances are you'll soon become so engrossed with the daily comings and goings of the creatures around you that some days you won't even draw them – but just enjoy them. When you are at that stage, when you simply enjoy birds for all that they are, then you can start to connect with the essence of the creatures.

As you're watching a blackbird hunting a damp lawn for worms, you'll soon start to anticipate his next move, a staccato stride-hop with head on one side, quick dart forward, slight shuddering struggle (notice the weight transferred through the body to a pulling position) and out comes the worm – down in one – look up, glance around (maybe a quick side-to-side wipe of his bill) and on to the next one. By watching and observing comes the ability to predict the next piece of action and this will hold you in good stead when it comes to making an image of the scene you are witnessing – because you'll be ready for it.

Although birds are motifs in many genres of art, there is something quite distinctive about the subject of bird art. It encompasses a huge range of interests: the science of ornithology, the hobby of birdwatching, caged-bird keeping, falconry and hunting, and can be found in the finest galleries and collections as well as on calendars, greetings cards and T-shirts.



John Busby: two starlings bathing. A Conté pencil drawing; a real sense of the artist deriving as much pleasure from the event as are the birds.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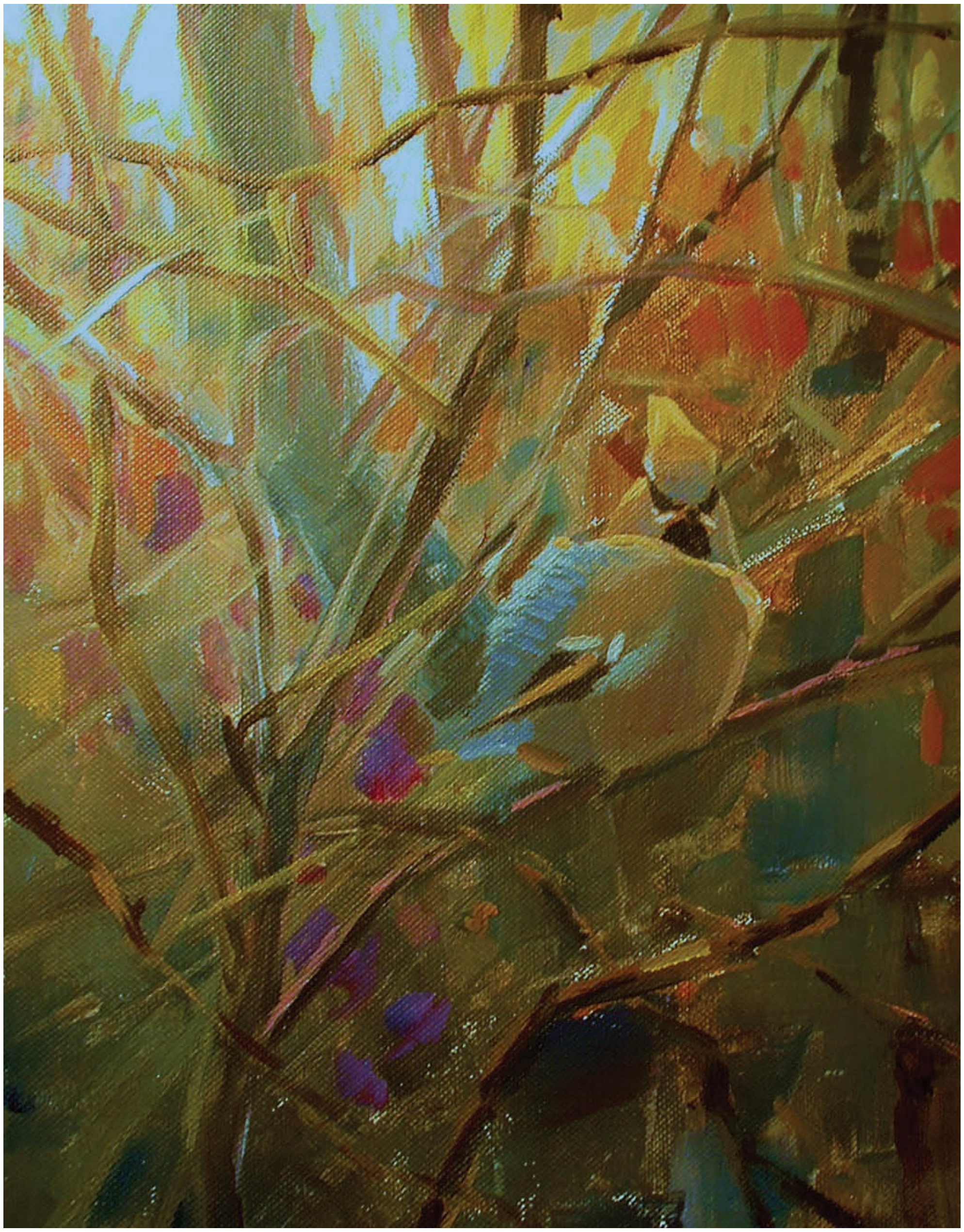
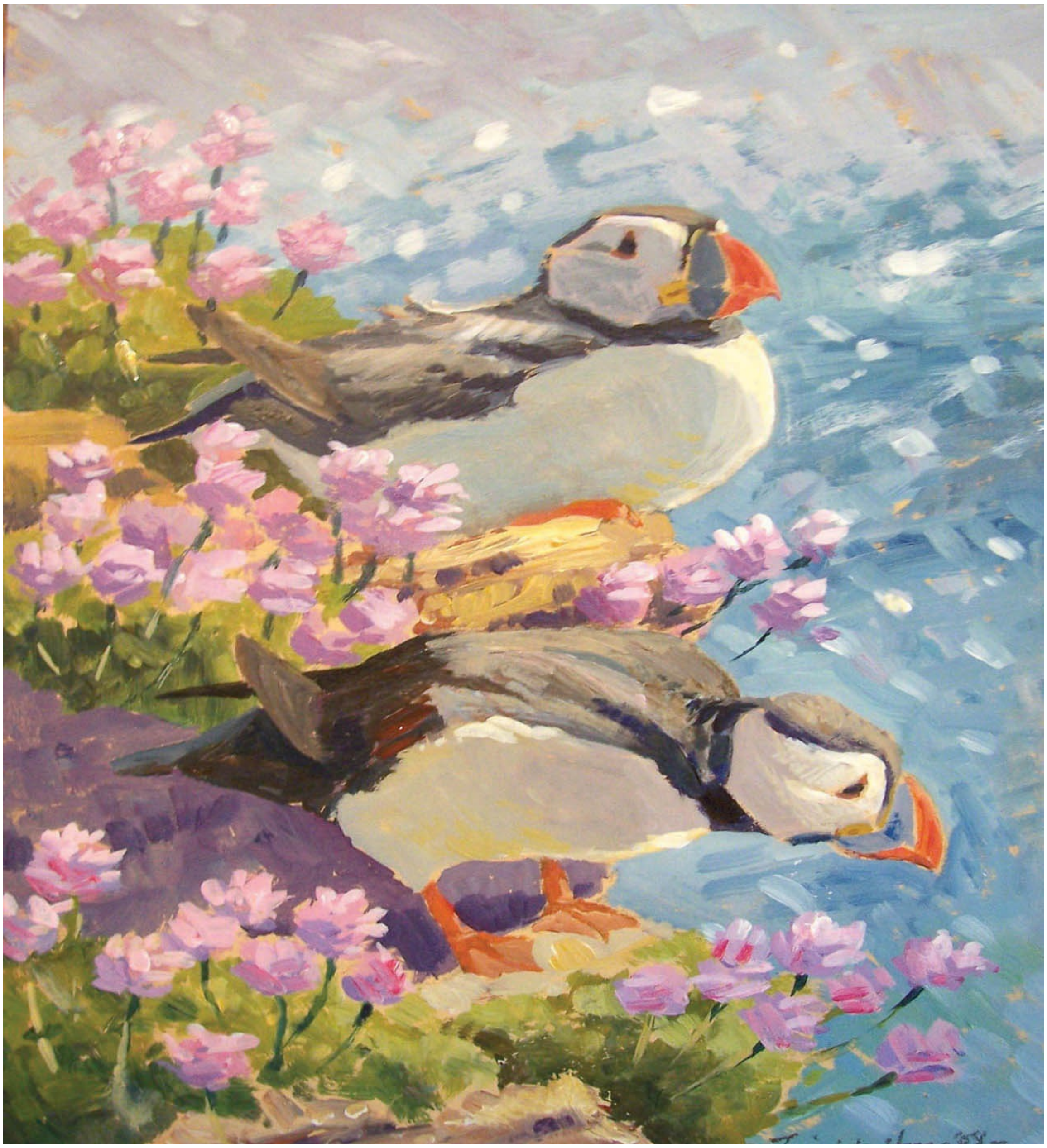
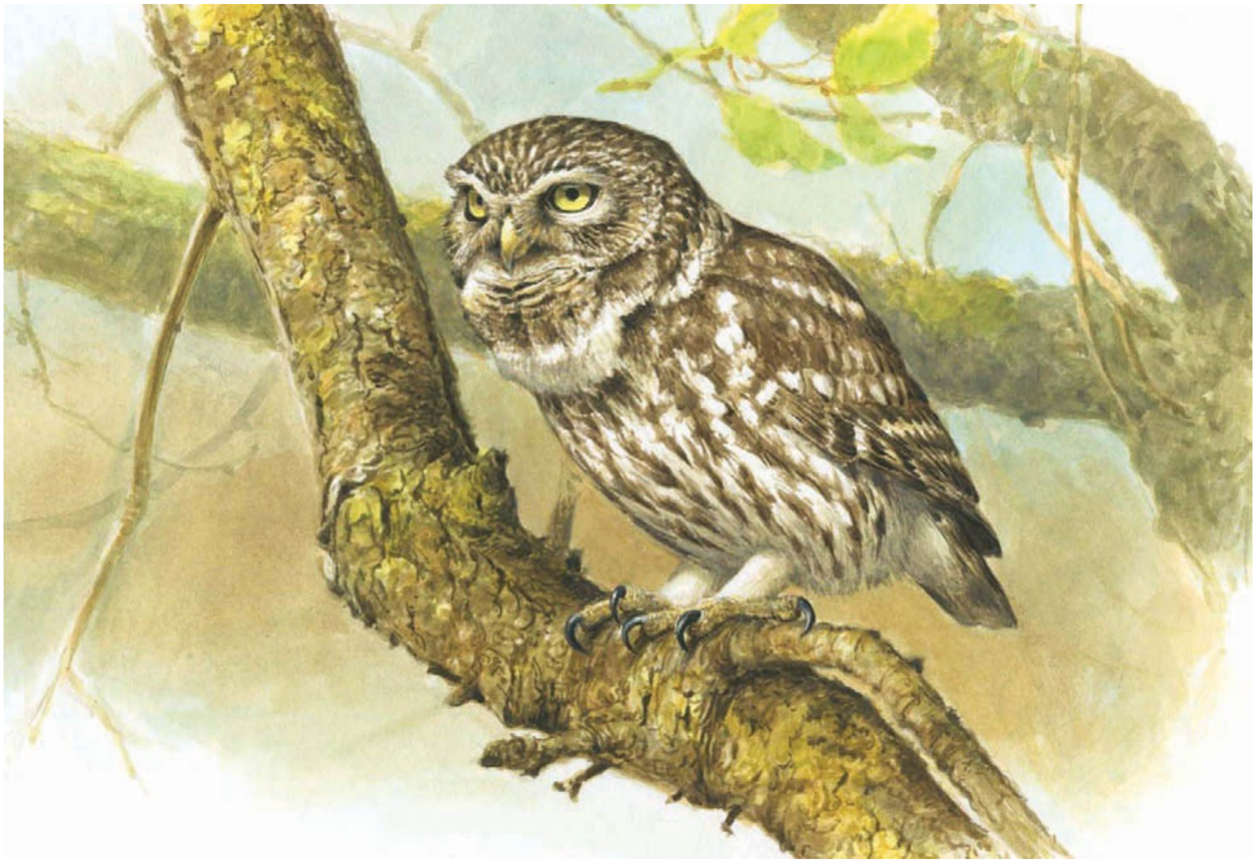
Szabolcs Kokay: yellowhammer singing. Watercolour study.



Tim Wootton: waxwing in the garden. An acrylic painting made in the studio one winter evening, immediately after watching this bird settling down to roost; the sun had just disappeared from view and was backlighting the scene with a golden winter light.



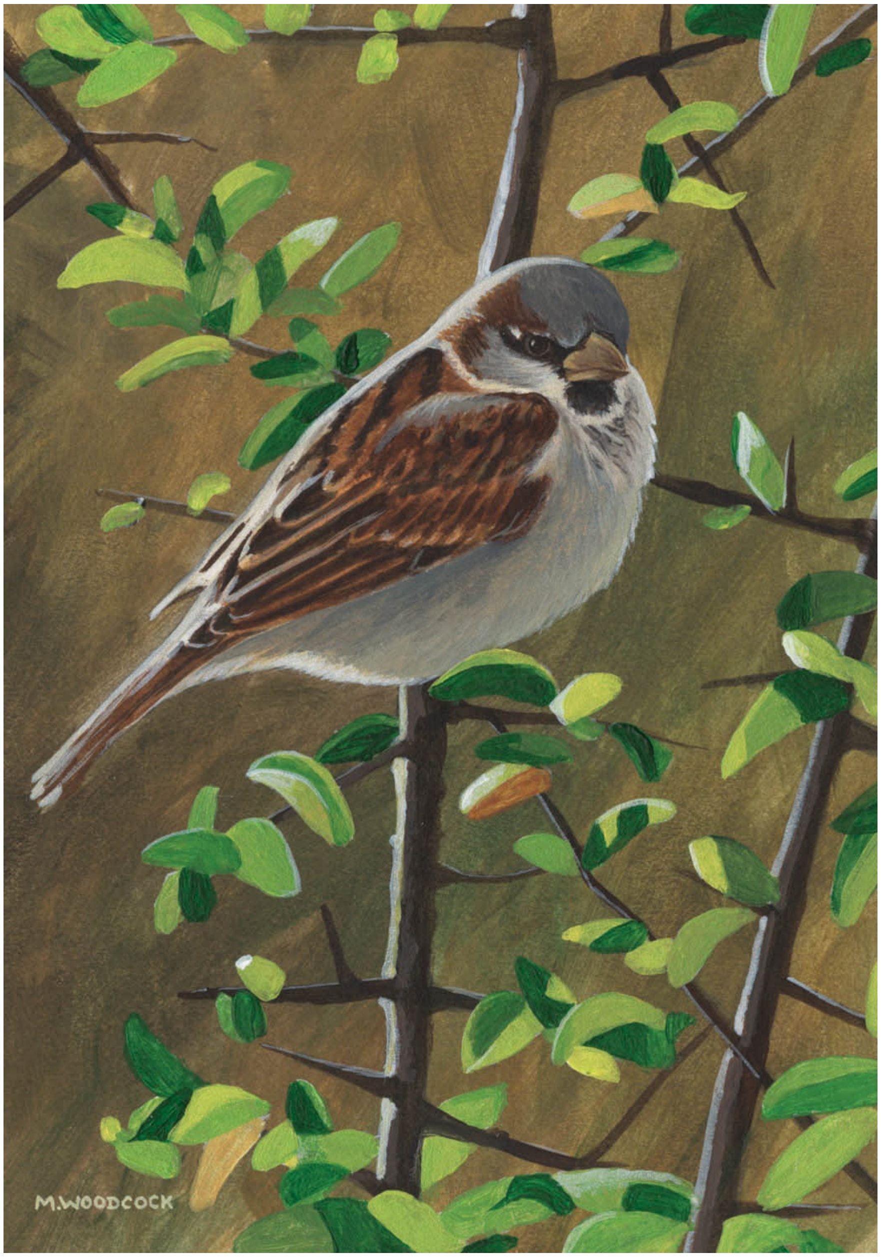
Tim Wootton: puffins.



Paschalis Dougalis: *Steinkauz* (little owl).

In fact it could be said that ‘bird art’ straddles two disciplines, and two that aren’t usually seen as comfortable bedfellows: science and art. There is no doubt that bird art has been disparaged throughout the years by art critics who don’t recognize it as a form of self-expression but can only see the pedantic approach to bird representation; whilst on the other hand the subject suffers from attacks by less forgiving sceptics who will readily identify errors in plumage detail or attitude of any piece of bird-related art that doesn’t conform to their exacting scientific measure. Perhaps it’s exactly this apparent dichotomy that makes birds and bird art so engaging. And why some artists are adamant that they will not be pigeon-holed into either art or illustration – if indeed there is a difference.

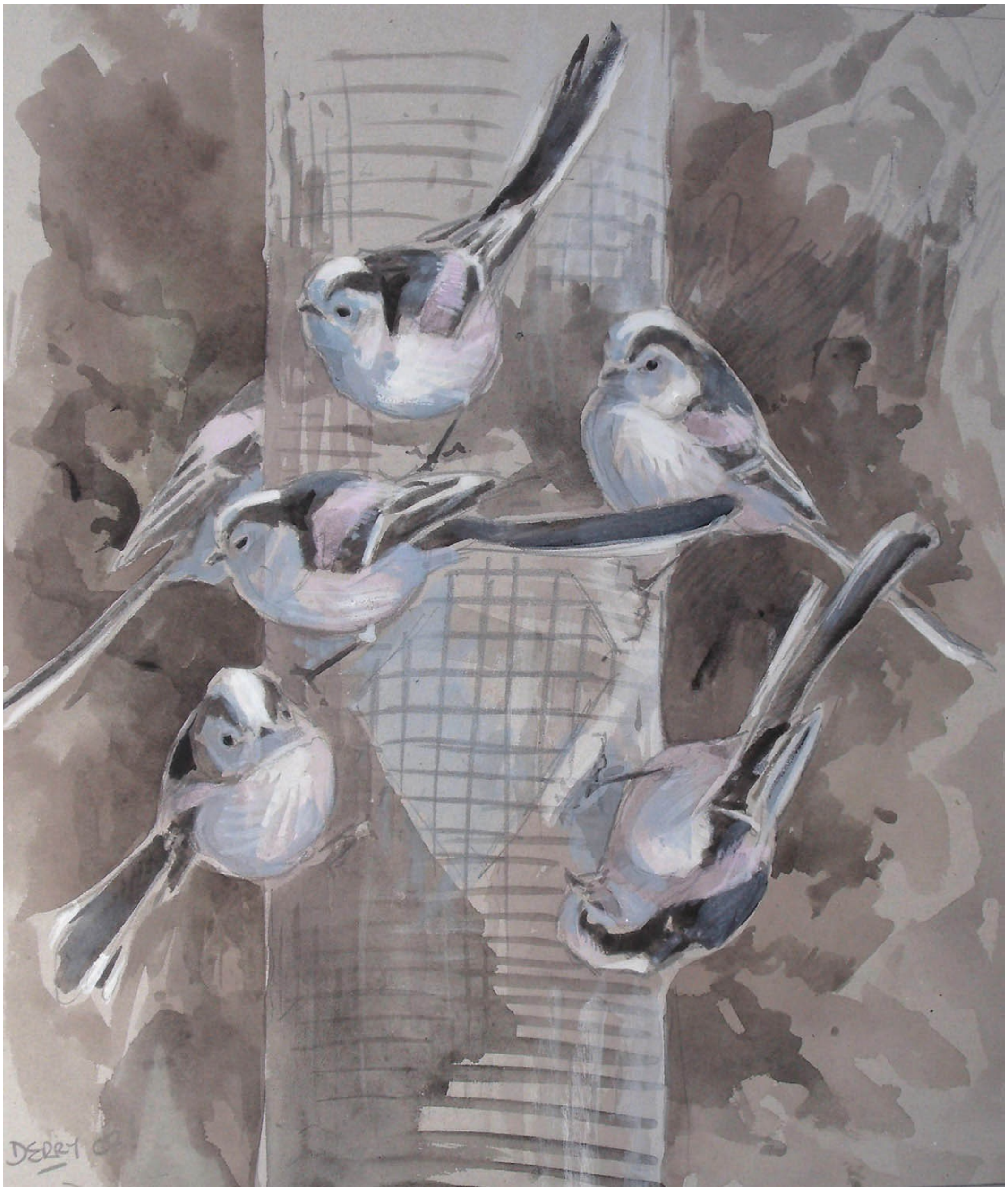
Certain birds seem to make a deep connection with us; something about the way they are and the way they behave touches us poignantly and, rightly or wrongly, it is difficult not to think that they are just a little bit like us. There are some real avian characters – true ambassadors of their kind. If a public relations company were to try and design a birdyfigurehead with which humanity would connect, it would find it near impossible to come up with anything quite so engaging as a puffin. Described as sea-parrots or clowns, depending on how generous you’re being, they are delightful to look at and certainly strike a chord with us, albeit anthropomorphically. Other personalities of the bird world must include parrots and budgerigars, peacocks perhaps, penguins certainly, owls and falcons, ostriches and wrens – I imagine there isn’t a bird alive that someone doesn’t adore. Magpies get a bad press but I find them incredibly beautiful and fascinating to watch. Every garden will have its regular flying visitors, and every owner of each garden will view the birds as ‘their’ birds, feed them and watch their seasonal movements; and they would certainly notice if the robin didn’t appear for a day or two!



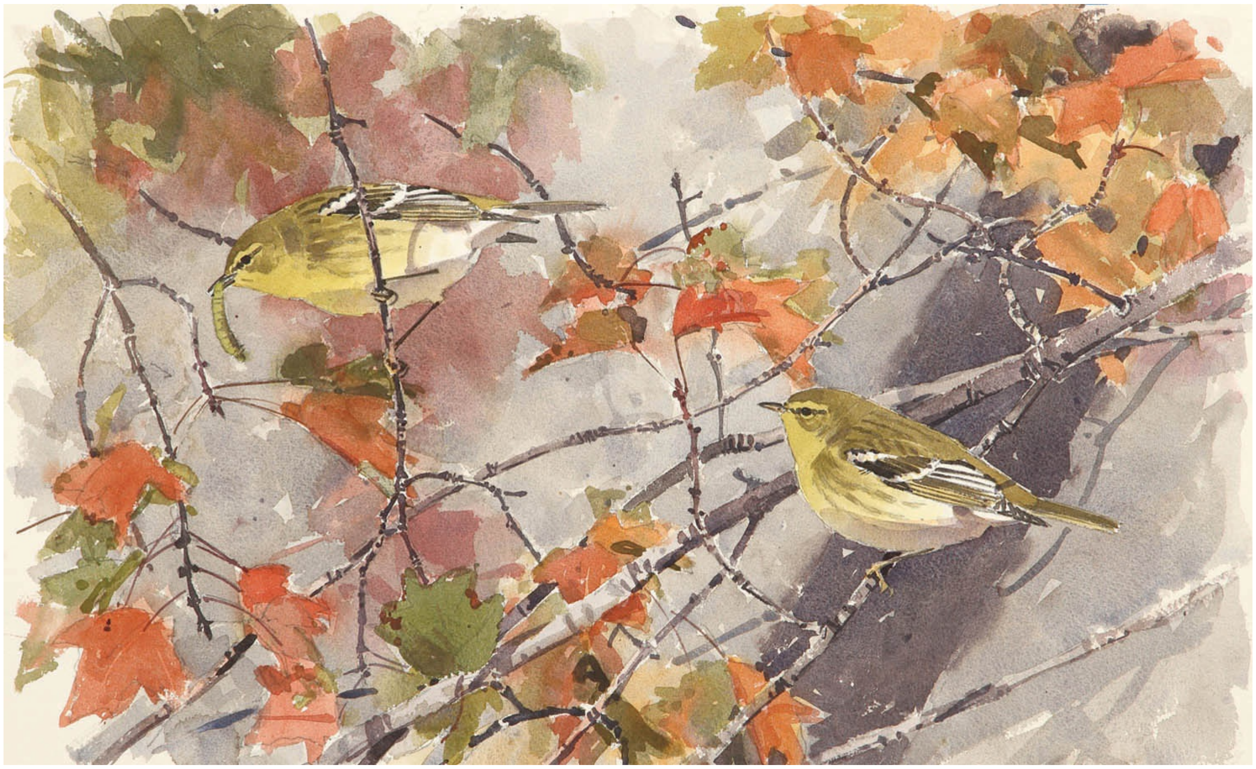
Mike Woodcock: house sparrow. A characterful acrylic portrait delighting in this familiar species.

Birds become such a part of our everyday lives in a way that wild mammals, for the most part, never could. Mammals, by and large, have decided not to get too close to humans – they've learned from past history that it's generally not good for their health. It's this regular and solicited contact with birds that sets them apart from the rest of the animal kingdom and it must also be one of the main reasons why we would wish to capture their image in whatever way our artistic endeavours would allow us.

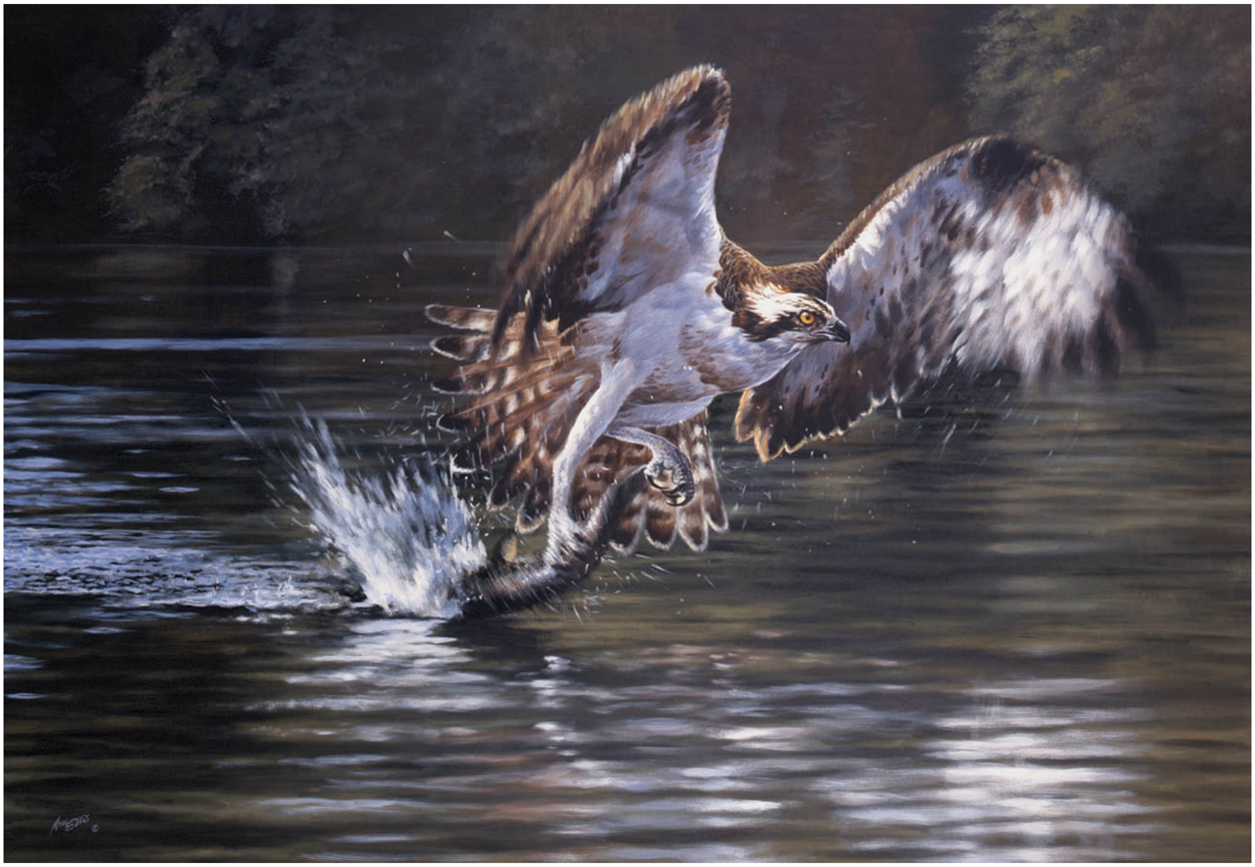
But besides birds being familiar and constant companions, they also symbolize the free and wild. If the robin and sparrow represent all that we cherish in our domestic environment, then birds such as eagles, albatrosses and terns must inhabit the other end of our psyche. These are special creatures indeed and it’s very difficult not to become infatuated with them once we have had even the slightest contact with them. These are far removed from the garden blue tits, whose daily comings and goings we witness as part of our own daily routine, watching them collect nest material to stuff into the nesting box we’ve made or bought and nailed to our shed wall; watching ma and pa blue tit out collecting little green caterpillars for hungry youngsters; and finally to watch them emerge from the hole and disappear into the wilderness of the garden shrubbery.



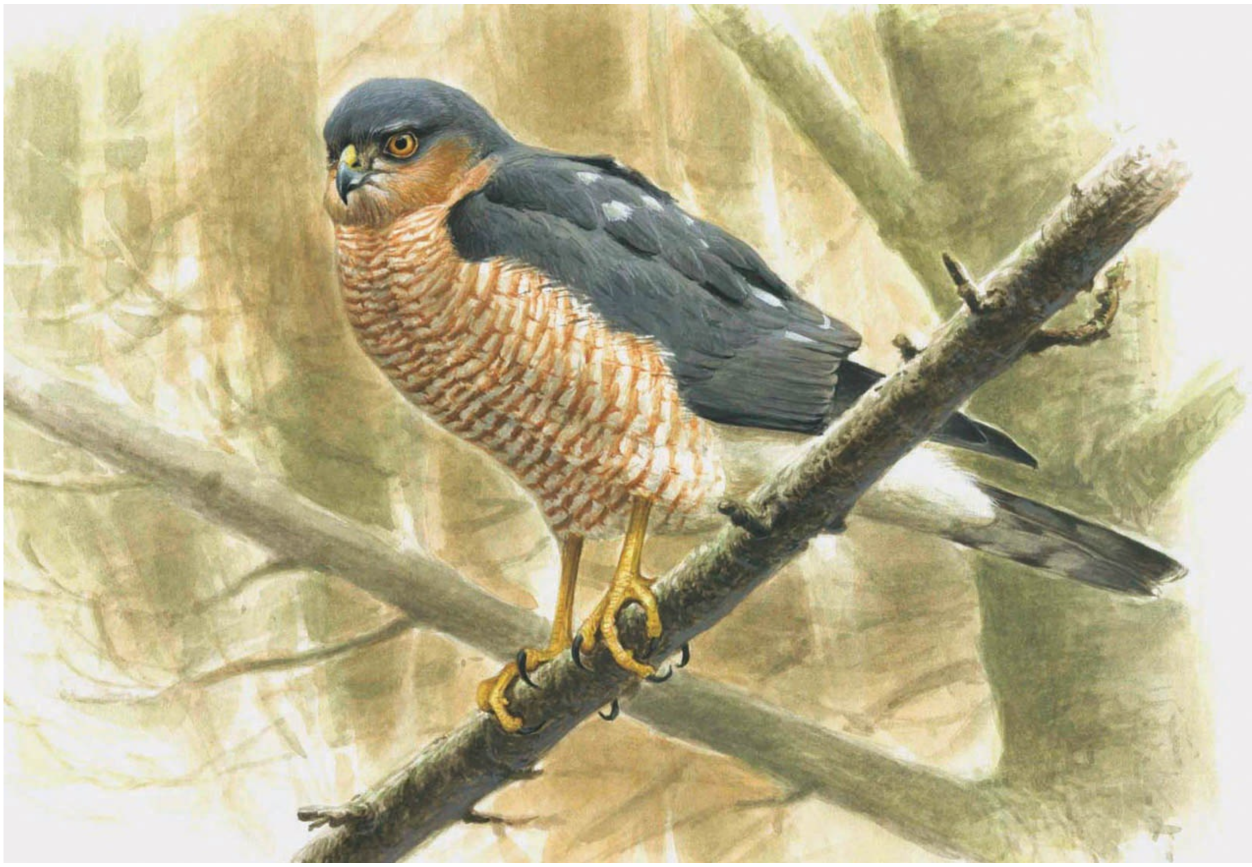
Nick Derry: long-tailed tits at the garden feeder. Watercolour and white gouache on tinted paper.



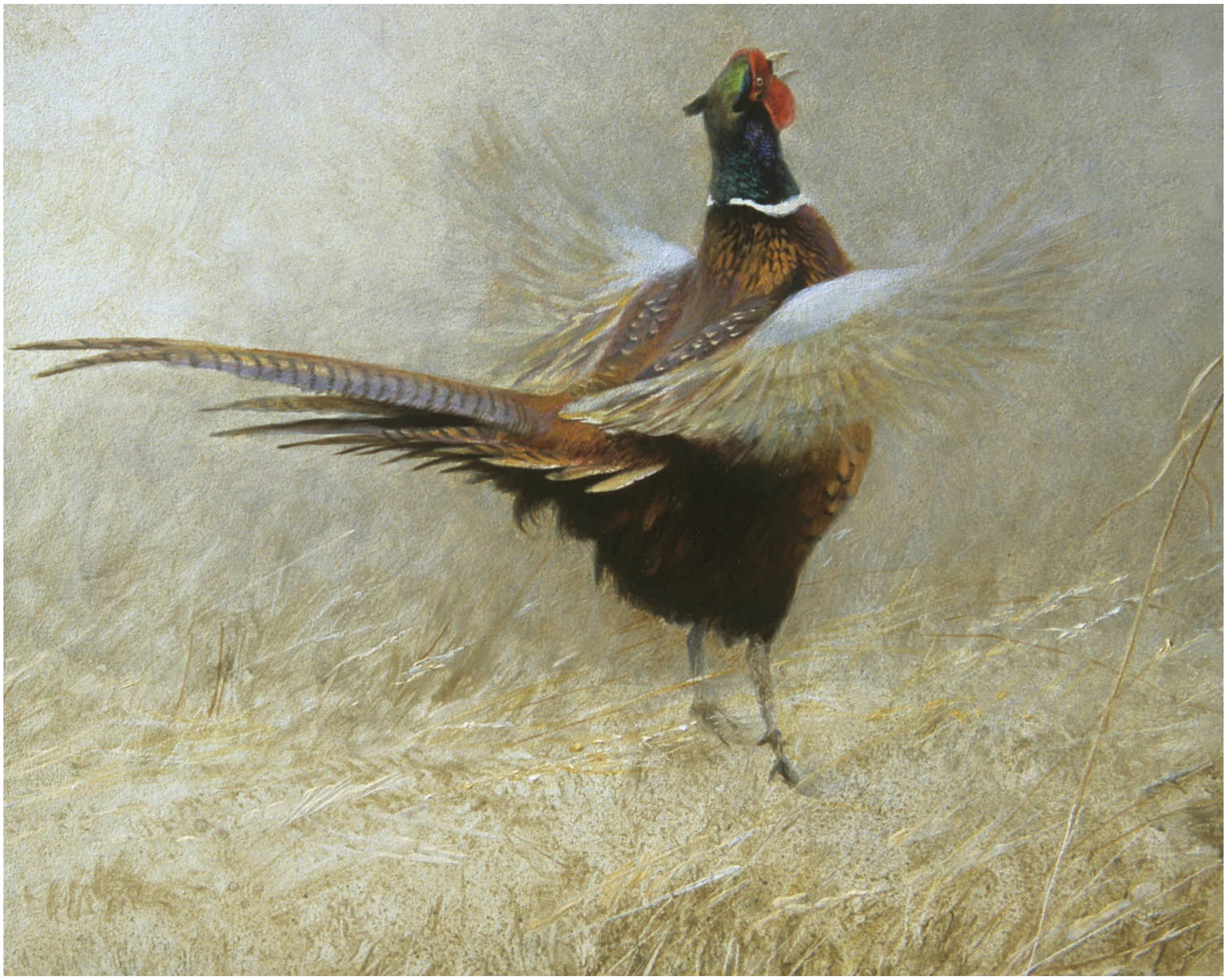
Barry Van Dusen: *Blackpolls in Red Maple*. Blackpoll warblers hunting caterpillars in the canopy.



Andrew Ellis: osprey. Acrylics.



Paschalis Dougalis: portrait of a sparrowhawk. This species became virtually extinct in Britain, suffering DDT poisoning as a result of concentration of the chemical in the food chain.



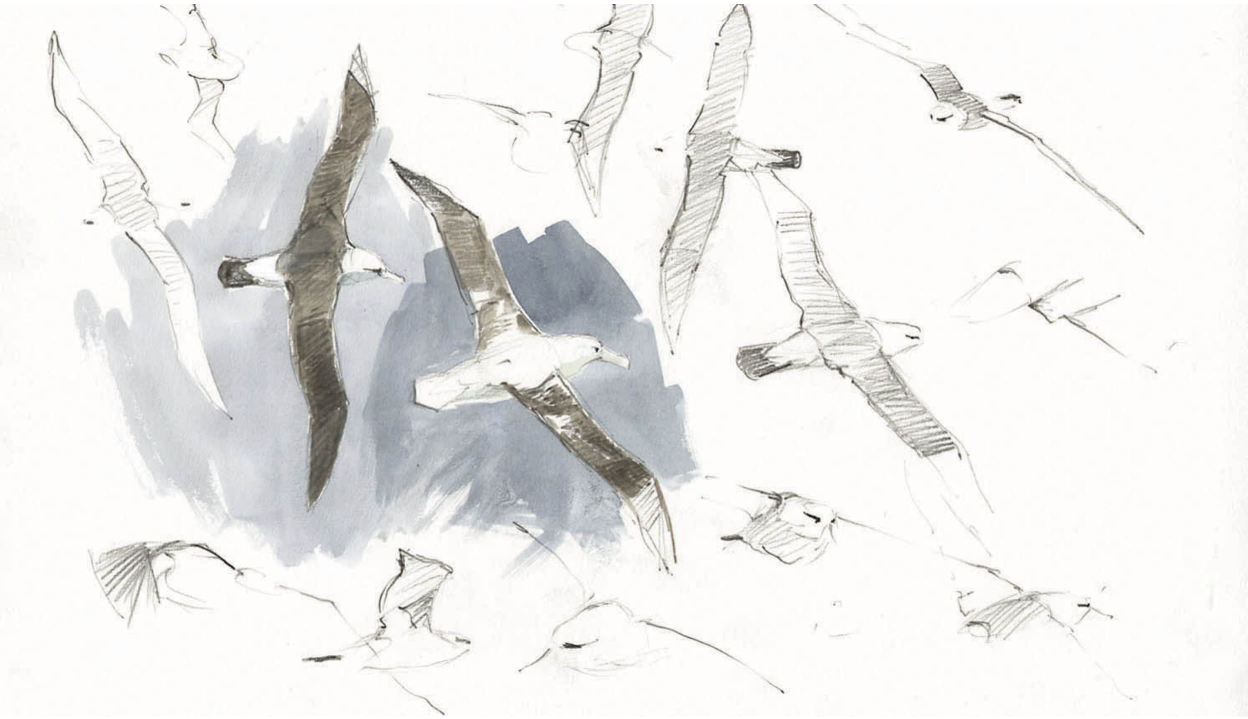
Robert Bateman: cock pheasant crowing.

Learning just a tiny amount about the arctic tern is surely enough to turn anyone on to this superb little bird, which habitually migrates the furthest – some of them over 22,000 miles every year, following the summer sun. Some breed in the Arctic and migrate during the end of summer to enjoy the fish stocks and the long daylight of the Austral summer while the northern hemisphere endures the cold winter months. About the size of a starling, Arctic terns can live up to thirty years and do a 50,000-mile round trip each year.

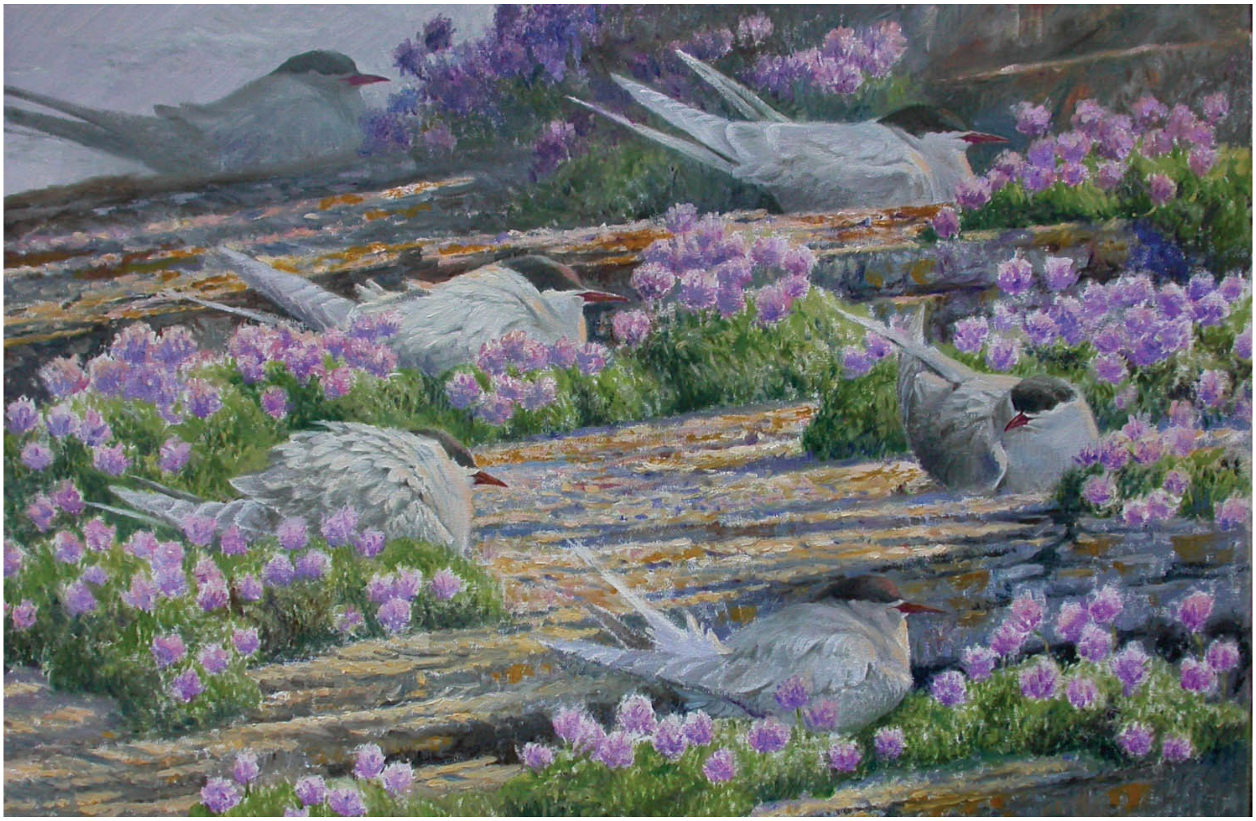
Eagles have symbolized power and nobility for thousands of years and they are still held in similar regard today. Unfortunately, like all birds of prey, they find themselves in conflict with mankind and his designs on how the world should operate. Poisoning, trapping and shooting have been the bird of prey’s prospect for too long now, and although we are in an age of so-called enlightenment, this dark outlook continues, even in Britain.

And then there are species about which we know very little, such as albatrosses and their kin; what do they do when not on their breeding sites dotted throughout the Southern Oceans? No doubt research and satellite tracking will reveal more to science, but I suspect it will be quite a while before we ever fully get to know them. Add to these birds some so secretive they are never seen in daylight – those that live in caves in dense forests, those inhabiting frozen wastelands, birds on every continent and in almost every place imaginable (including the Moon, if we believe some nineteenth-century works on natural history!).

Here I've mentioned just a few species and what they mean to us, but there are almost 9,000 bird species on Earth. A world of birds truly is a rich and wondrous heritage, and it is little wonder that artists turn to them as a Muse, and that birds themselves can turn otherwise normal folk into artists!



Bruce Pearson: studies of albatrosses.



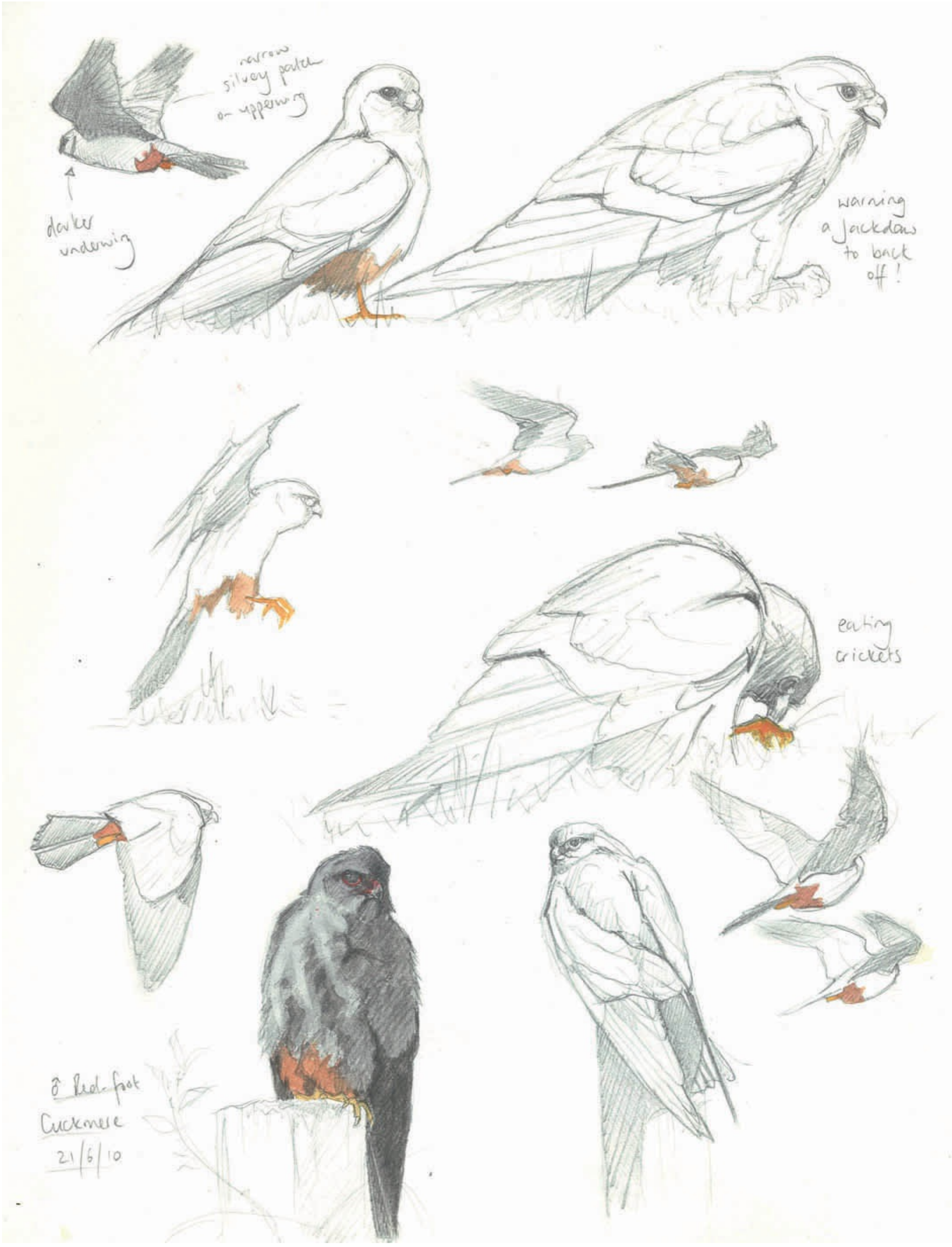
Tim Wootton: *After the Rain*. An oil painting of arctic terns on a sea-stack in the Orkney Islands. For almost a decade now arctic terns have been all but failing in their attempts to breed in northern Europe. Where I live in Orkney there had been hardly any arctic tern chicks fledged for several years and in 2008 every colony in the Isles had been deserted by the adult birds long before any chicks were raised. All except one, that is. A relatively tiny colony of birds stayed together and between the eighty adults, they managed to raise seventeen youngsters. I spent many summer evenings sitting on the cliff top adjacent to the colony making drawings and paintings of the birds. There was one particular evening of warm sun interspersed with squally showers blowing across from the north west, and afterwards the low liquid sunlight seemed all the warmer and illuminated the scene perfectly. This is the painting that resulted from that moment, titled *After the Rain* because of the meteorological reference and the philosophical one; perhaps this tiny bastion of chick-rearing birds would herald an upturn in the fortunes of the arctic tern in the islands?

CHAPTER 2

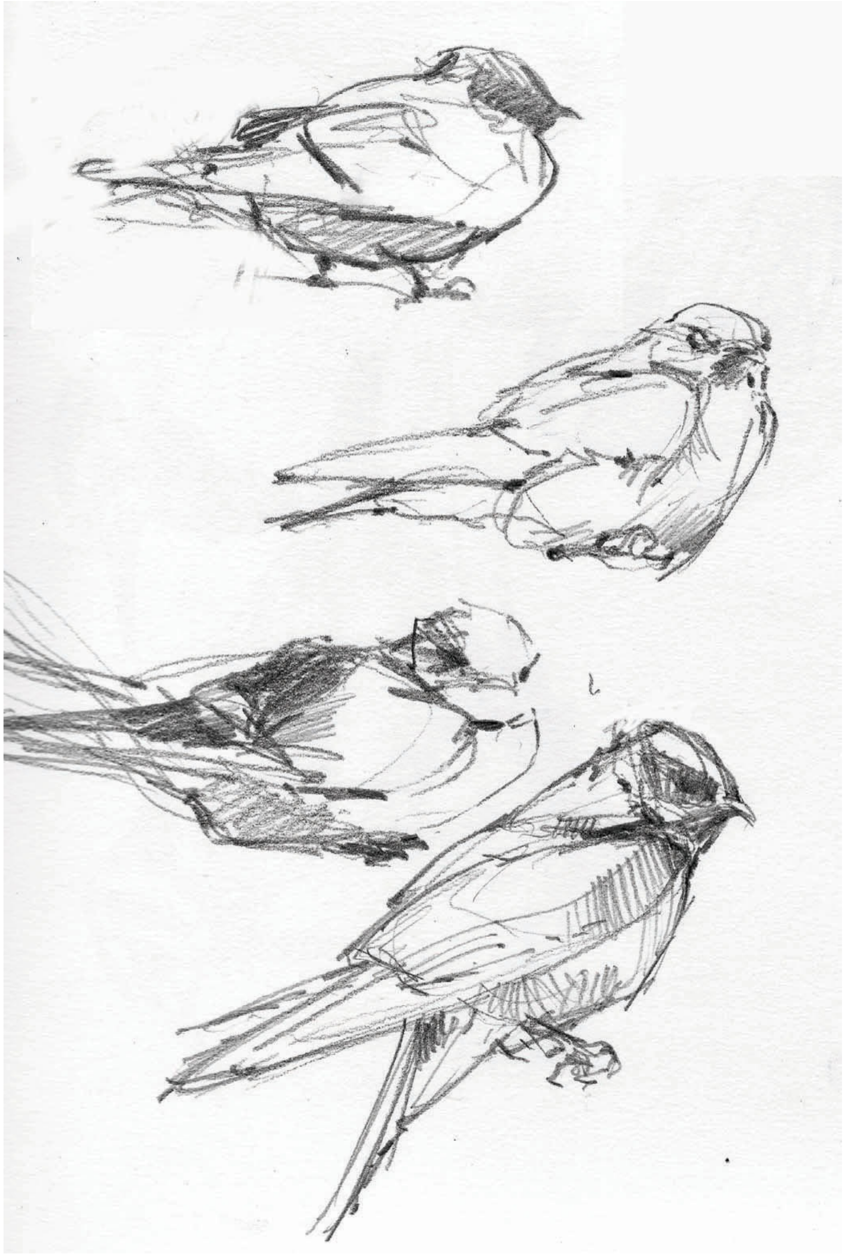
DRAWING TECHNIQUES

That which we persist in doing becomes easier to do; not that the nature of the thing itself is changed, but that our power to do is increased.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

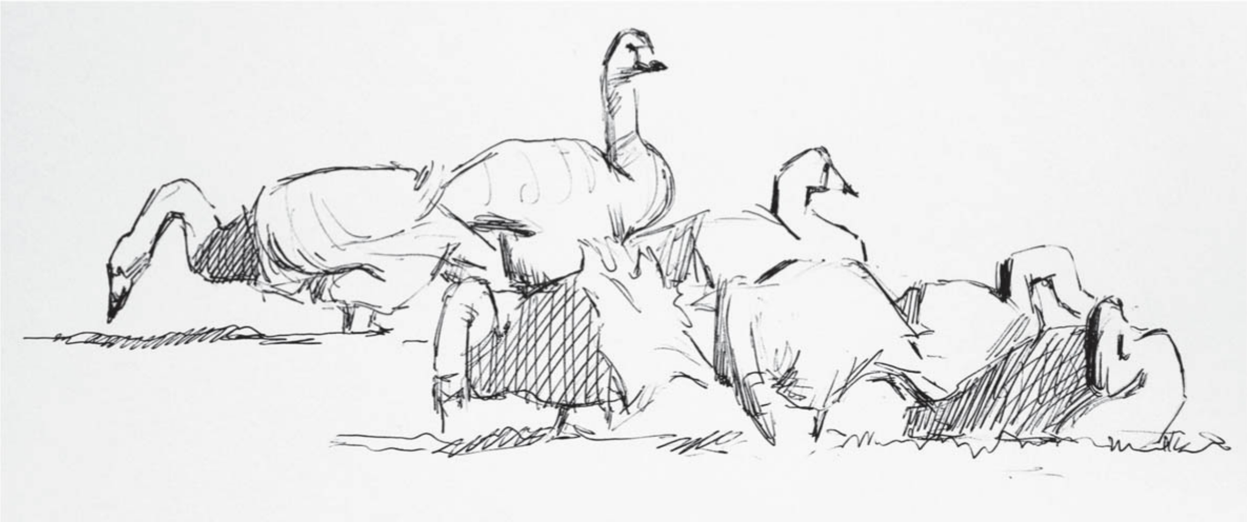

narrow silvery patch on upperwing
darker underwing
warning a Jackdaw to back off!
eating crickets
♂ Red-foot
Cuckmere
21/6/10

Adam Bowley: red-footed falcon sketches.



Debby Kaspari: purple martins (ink).

Developing drawing skills can be a lifelong process for the would-be artist. The basics, however, may be simplified. There are only two types of line – curved and straight – and if one can draw both of these, then there is no reason why any kind of drawing cannot be attempted. As children, we were encouraged to draw and we did so without inhibition. We were able to make representational images with little or no reference other than our imagination, or mind's eye. If we could make drawings as children, with no reference, why then does it appear to be so very difficult to draw when reference is introduced? With something to look at and relate our drawings to the process ought to be easier – but it seems not to be. When starting out we can easily be distracted by too much visual information, so much so that the brain becomes overloaded and our attempts to convert what we can see into a linear depiction on paper flounder. Learning to draw isn't so much learning how to make a line on paper. It is more about learning to 'see'. What is meant by this is how to distil from all the visual information presented a simplified version, one which can be described in two dimensions onto a surface.

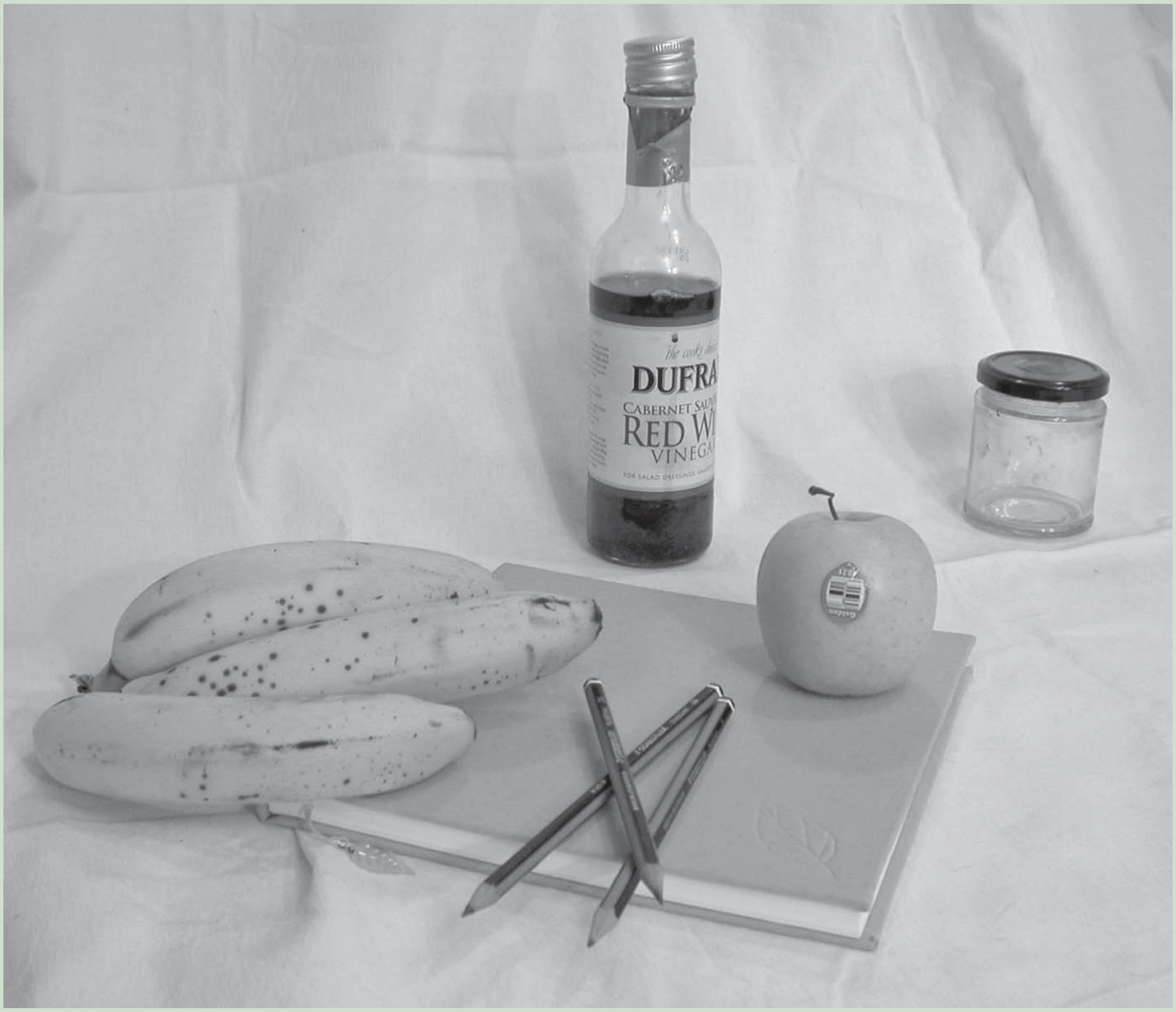


Tim Wootton: whooper swans in strong light and a stiff breeze. Biro drawing; the structure of the birds described in simple terms, outline and cross-hatch.

EXERCISE: LEARNING TO 'SEE'

Birds move. They move a lot and often they move quickly. If one is to attempt to portray birds doing what they do, then it is important to learn how to 'see'. What I mean by this is how to learn to capture in your mind's eye the shapes, forms and action of the living creature. As with all skills, this aspect of drawing can be nurtured and developed. The following exercise helps to develop observation and recollection of images.

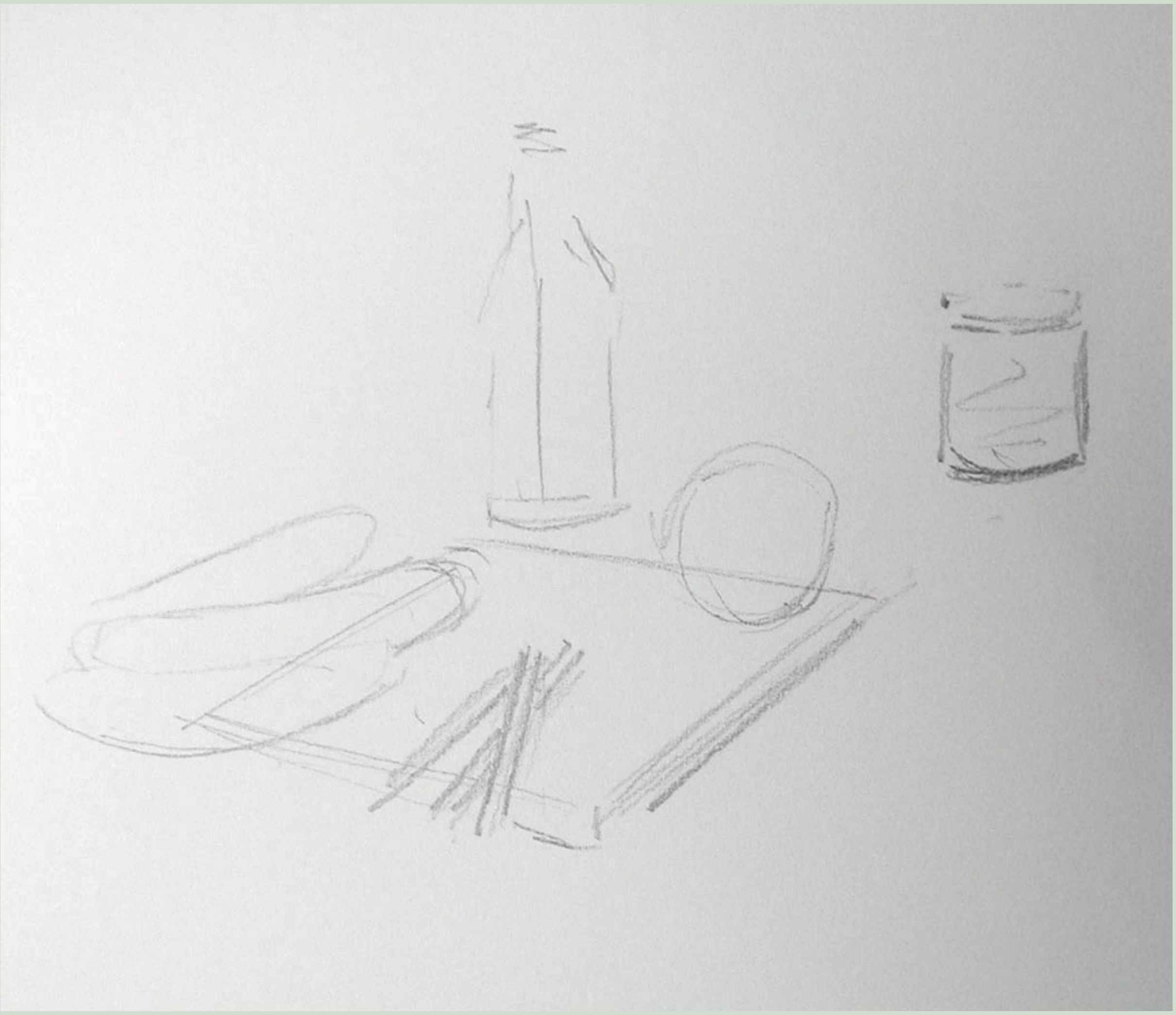
- Set up a few objects as in a still life. Study the shapes in front of you: not just the objects, but the spaces between them and their interrelationships.



Here is the set-up I put together. You can use any combination of objects you wish.

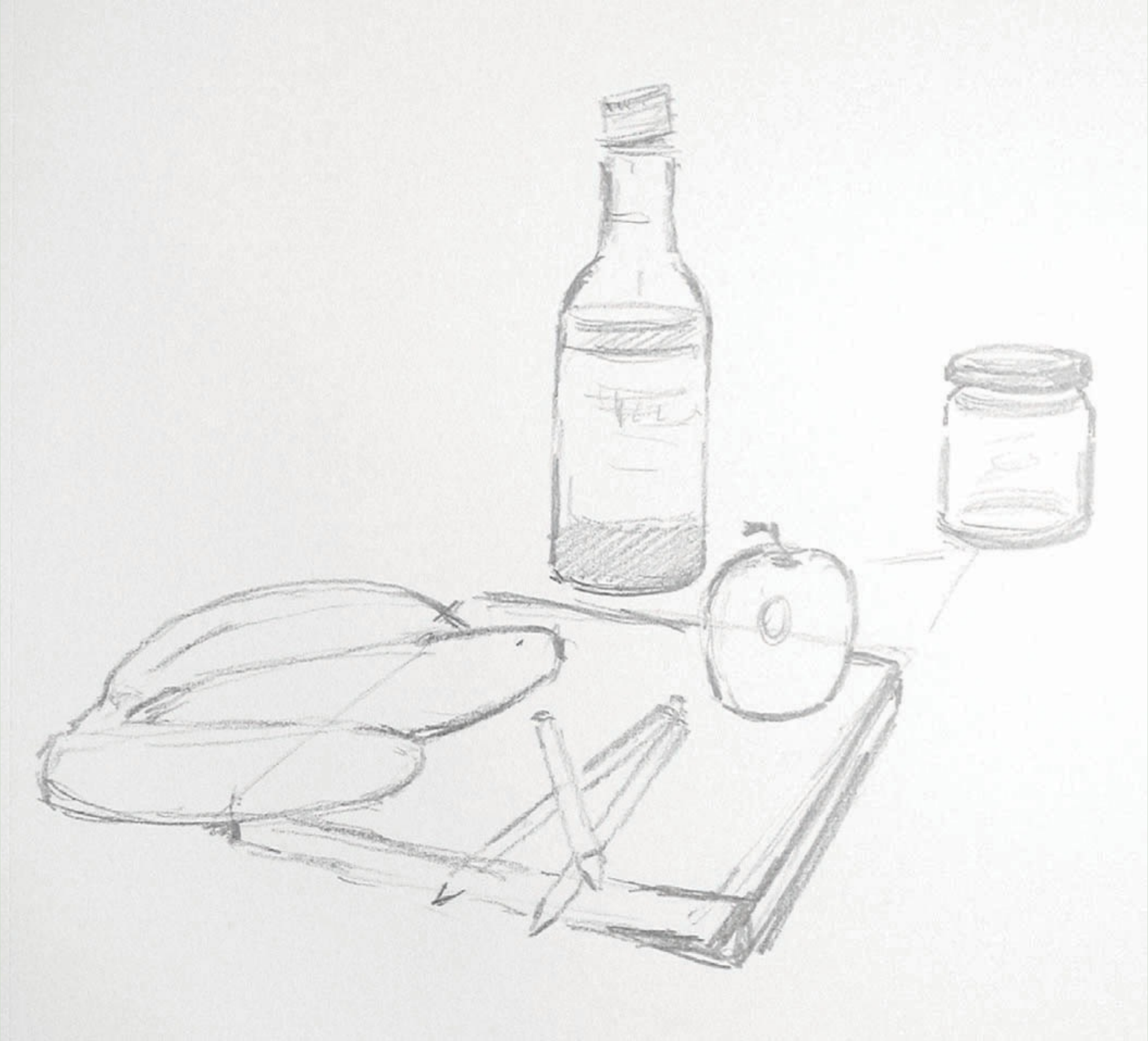
- Concentrate for three minutes on the assemblage. Then, without looking back at the set, immediately draw what you can remember. In your mind's eye, try to picture the scene as it appeared. Continue to draw for as long as you feel you are still adding valid information to the drawing. When you can remember no more from the set, stop working.

- Now compare your impression to the set in front of you. There will probably be some elements drawn fairly accurately and others not so. Spatial proportions are most likely to be awry and even the number of objects may be incorrect.



My first drawing after three minutes' study.

- Now spend thirty seconds looking at the set again. Make a drawing from life, referring constantly to the set. Look at the spaces between the objects (the 'negative shapes'), look for invisible lines that connect different objects together, such as parallel lines, geometric shapes where objects interconnect or objects sitting along the same plane. Spend five to ten minutes really investigating the set using linear drawing only. When you're happy with your representation – stop!

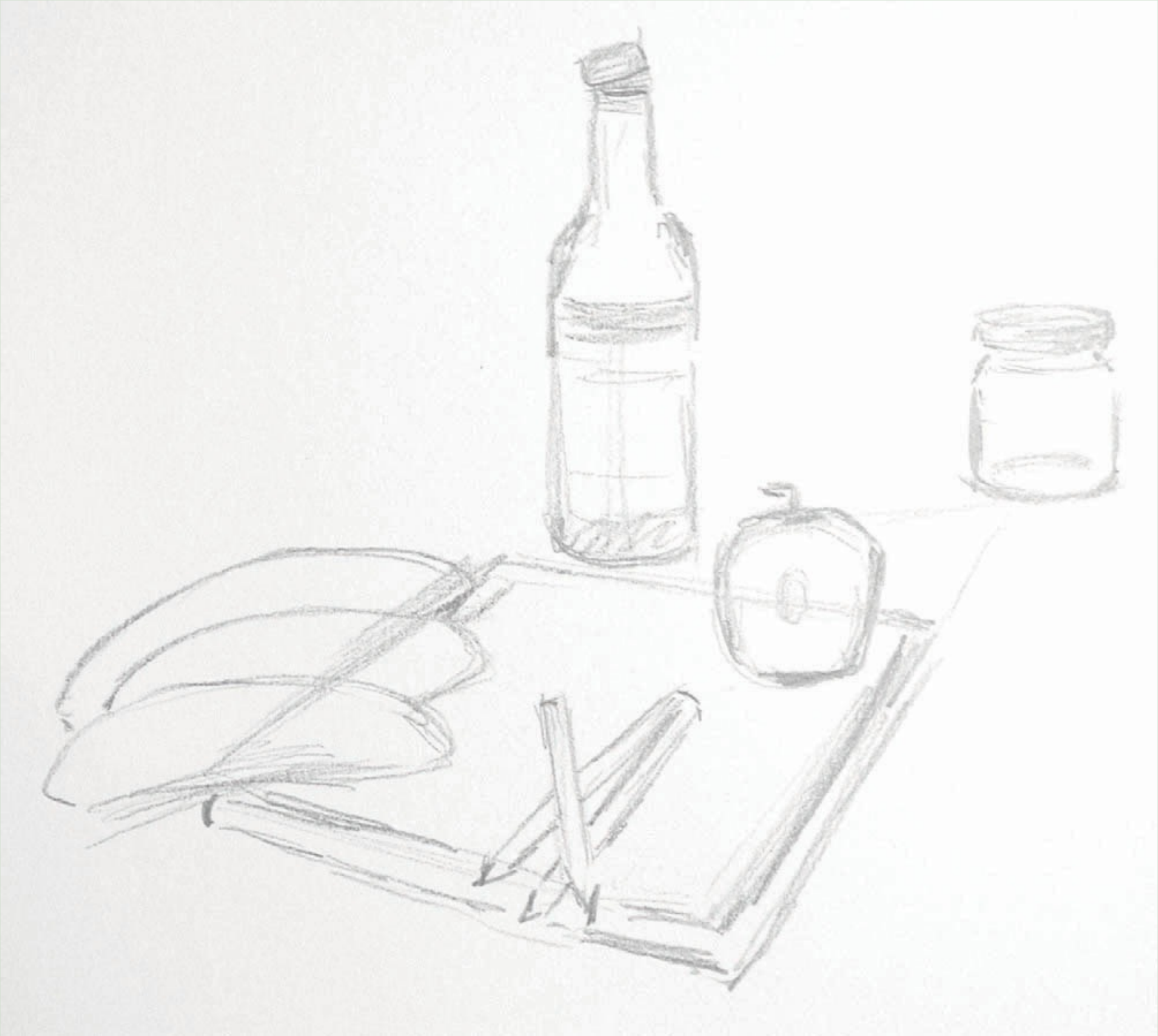


Four-minute drawing whilst referring to the set.

- Next, follow the first exercise you did. Again, study the set for three minutes. Look at all the shapes presented – positive and negative. Try to make visual patterns in your head.
- Turn away from the set and make another drawing. Refer to your immediate memory of the objects and try to recall the shapes you drew whilst you were drawing from life. Continue to draw until you

feel you’ve finished and cannot add any further information to the piece.

- Now compare all three drawings together. The middle drawing will probably be the most accurate (you were referring directly from the objects so it ought to be, really), but note the difference in the amount of information your last drawing contains in relation to the first.



Three-minute drawing from memory.

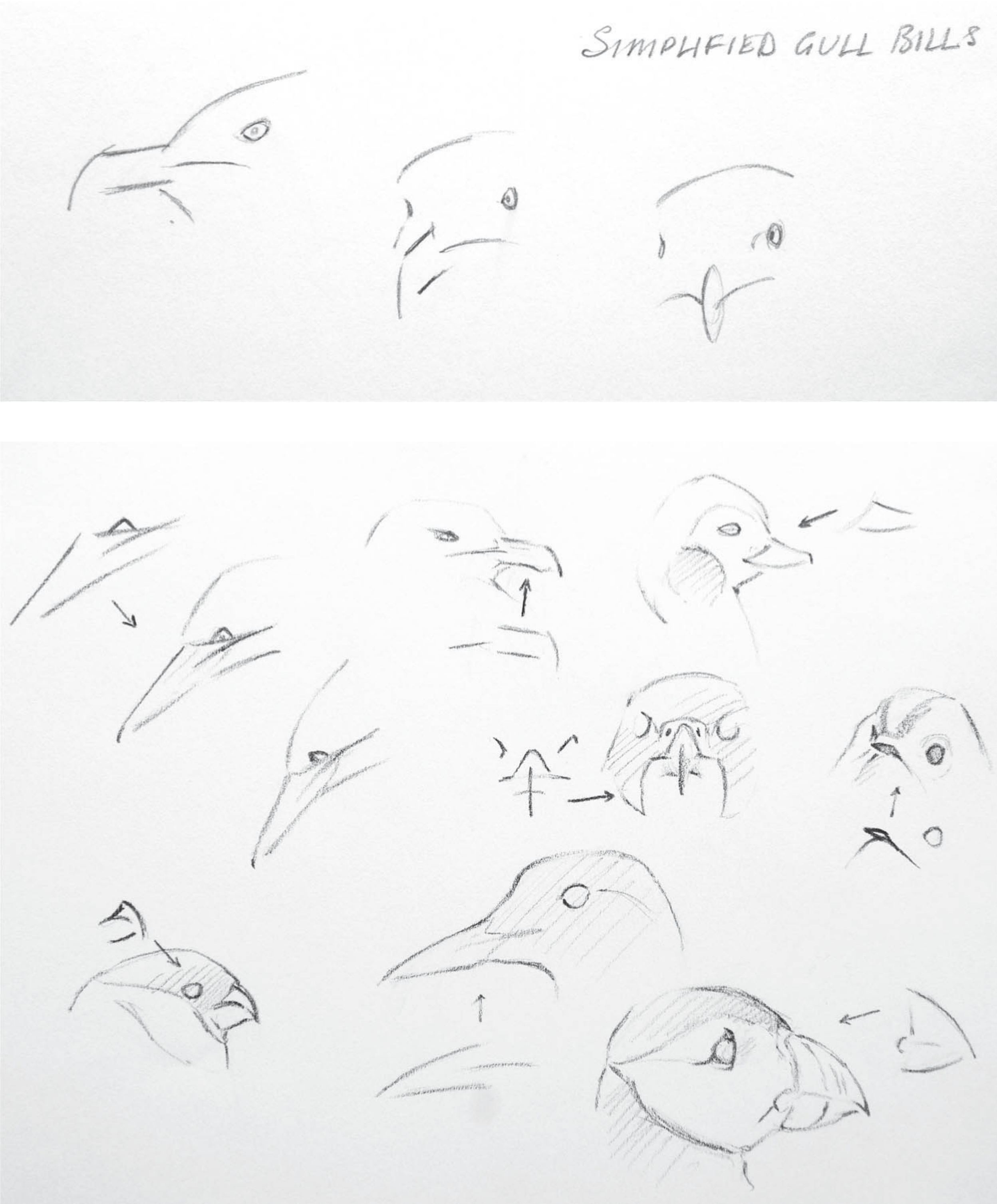
The constant study and reappraisal of the objects has improved your ability to ‘see’ the shapes with more clarity and precision at each stage. If you were to repeat the process several times, your understanding of the scene would increase at each and every stage.

This principle can be applied to any form of drawing from life and constant practice is a sure key to successful results when drawing birds. The hardest bit is making a start.

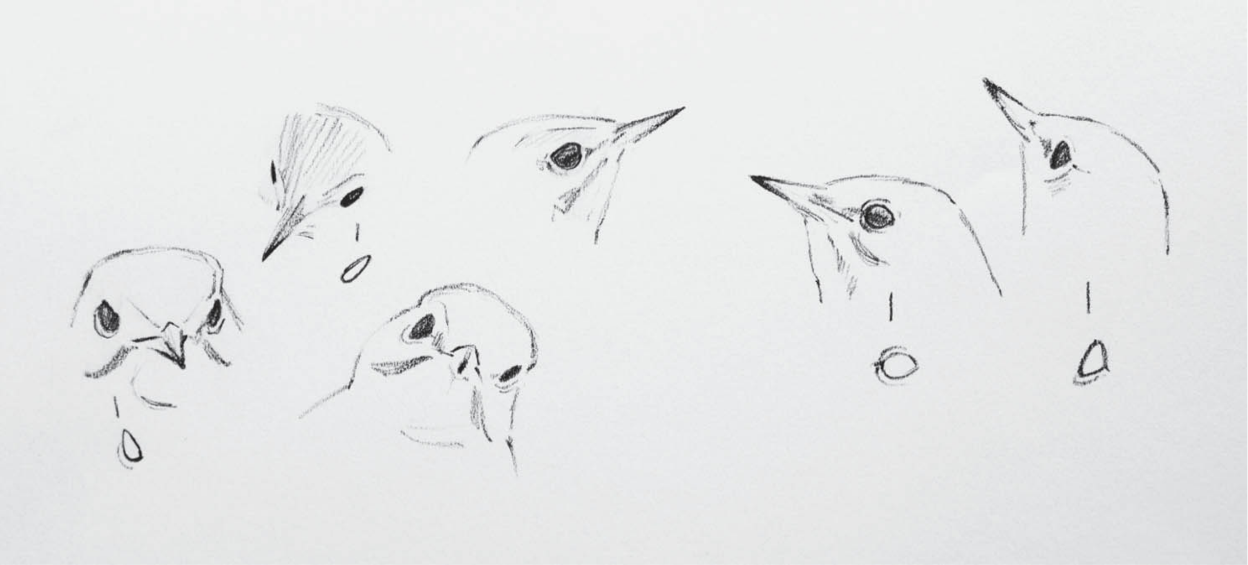
We must all be familiar with the traditional ‘two circle’ approach to drawing birds, depicting head and body. Fundamentally, this can be a useful approach to breaking the tension between your pencil and the foreboding expanse of the unmarked page. Usually the two circles are arranged one atop the other; this is where a touch of subtlety is required. Bird species have various shapes of skulls (and bills), which are connected to their bodies by the neck; they also have specific characteristics due to the number of vertebrae and habit of the bird (more of which in the anatomy section).

Birds’ beaks can cause the draughtsman many problems, so it may be helpful to use a shorthand method of representing these features. Simplistic shapes, lines of different lengths and breadths, cones and ovals may be interpreted as beaks and bills. What is more important is the particular angle of the beak, or its relationship to eye position and overall head shape. Body shape, leg length and a suggestion of how the creature moves are what will ultimately determine the character of the subject; something which is called ‘jizz’ (or ‘giss’ – general impression of size and shape) in birdwatching parlance.

Getting the exact facial pattern can be crucial to capturing the character of the bird. Knowledge of the different features of the head can help to get the precise arrangement of lights, darks and colours. The dark fringe to the white cheeks of the blue tit is a helpful pointer in describing the important line delineating the join of the head and the body. The white wingbar also accentuates the curve of the wings as they fold across the back.


SIMPLIFIED GULL BILLS

Simple ways to depict bill shapes.

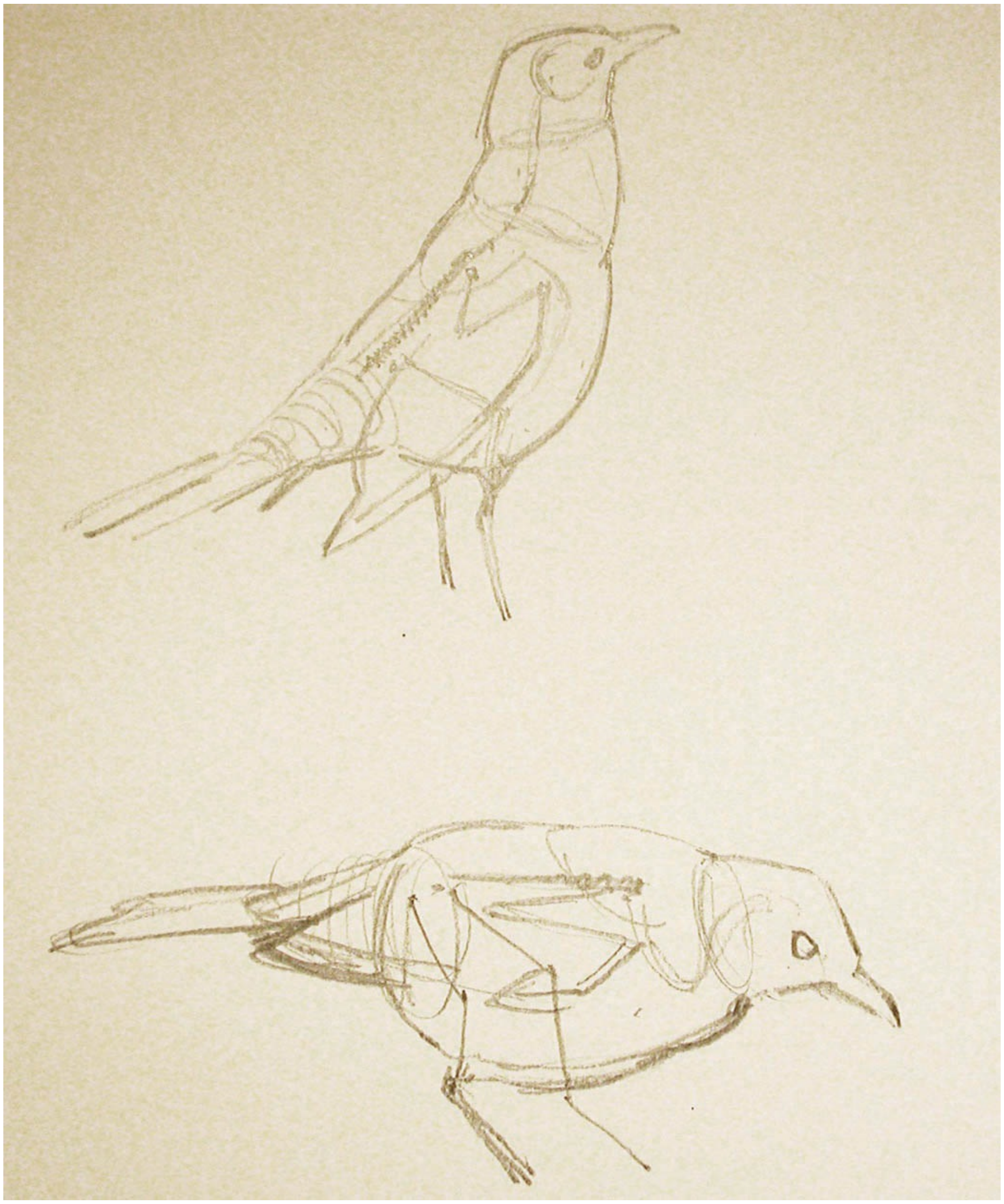


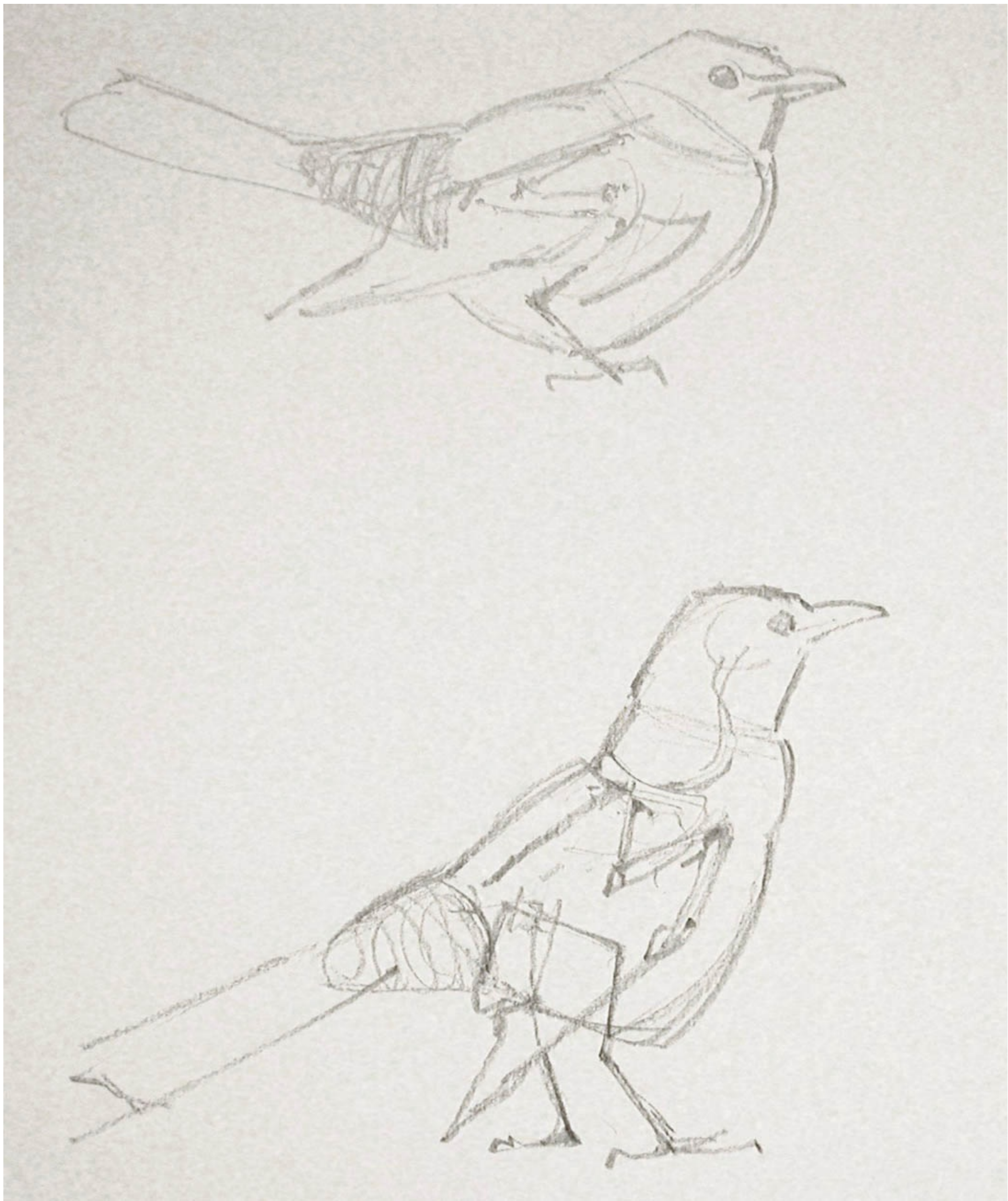
Eye shapes and bill angles of a rock pipit.

SIMPLE GEOMETRIC SHAPES

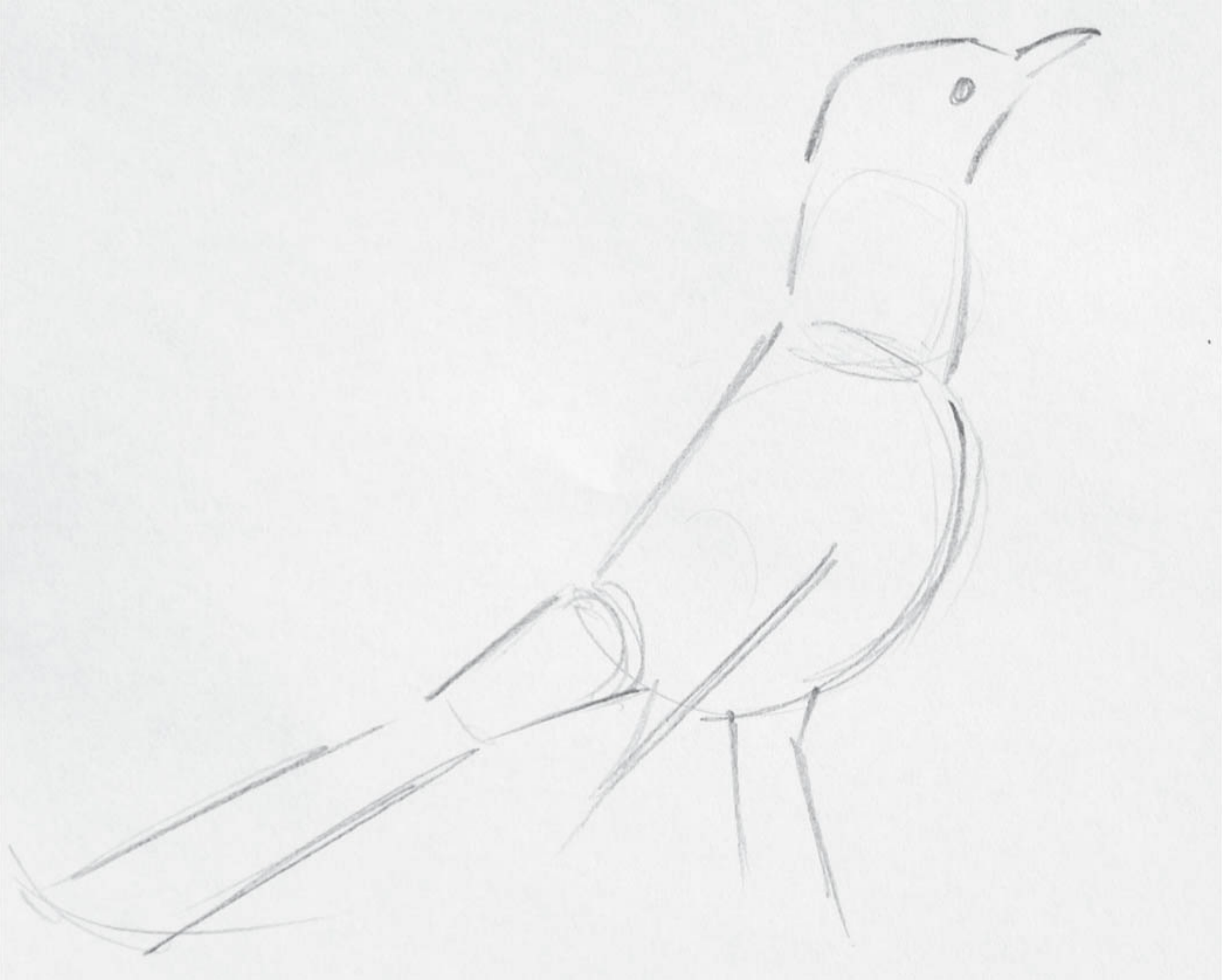
The ability to draw ovals, cones, cylinders and parallelograms is an essential part of the draughtsman’s toolkit. When drawing birds you will notice, with a bit of practice, that these shapes occur regularly. Recognizing where and when straight lines occur can help in ‘catching’ a pose, helping to create dynamism in the drawing. The fundamental lines and shapes will generally be curves and straight lines – not only describing the outlines of the bird, but also following external surface features such as wing edges and breast markings.

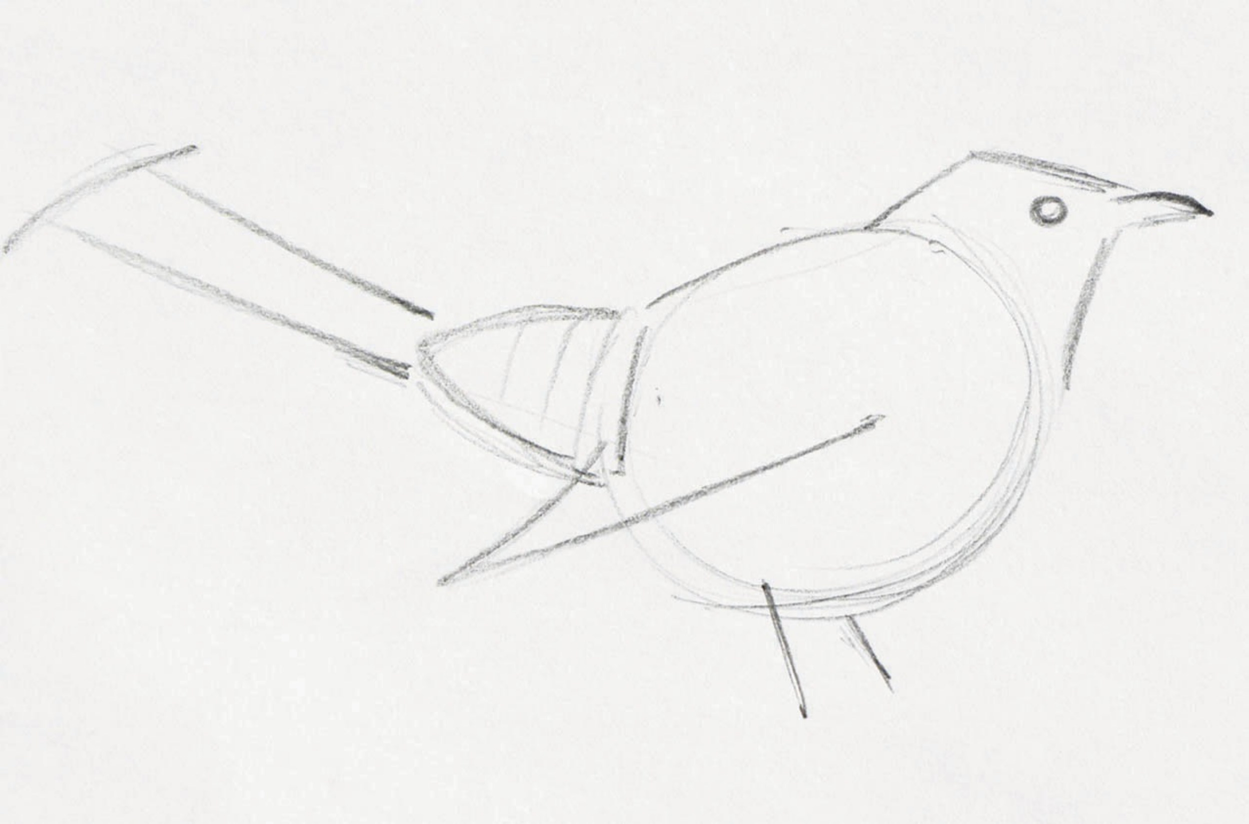
So it makes sense to be able to draw a selection of lines and to know a few techniques that can help when it comes to drawing the birds.





Tim Wootton: construction drawings of a blackbird. The outer shape of the bird is drawn using straight and curved lines, and by using spirals, cones and ellipses the drawing can have a sense of 'roundness' (that is, the curves of the bird don't stop at the outline). Look at how the ellipse connecting the head with the body describes both the angle and the shape; there are also imagined lines suggesting the wing and leg bones.



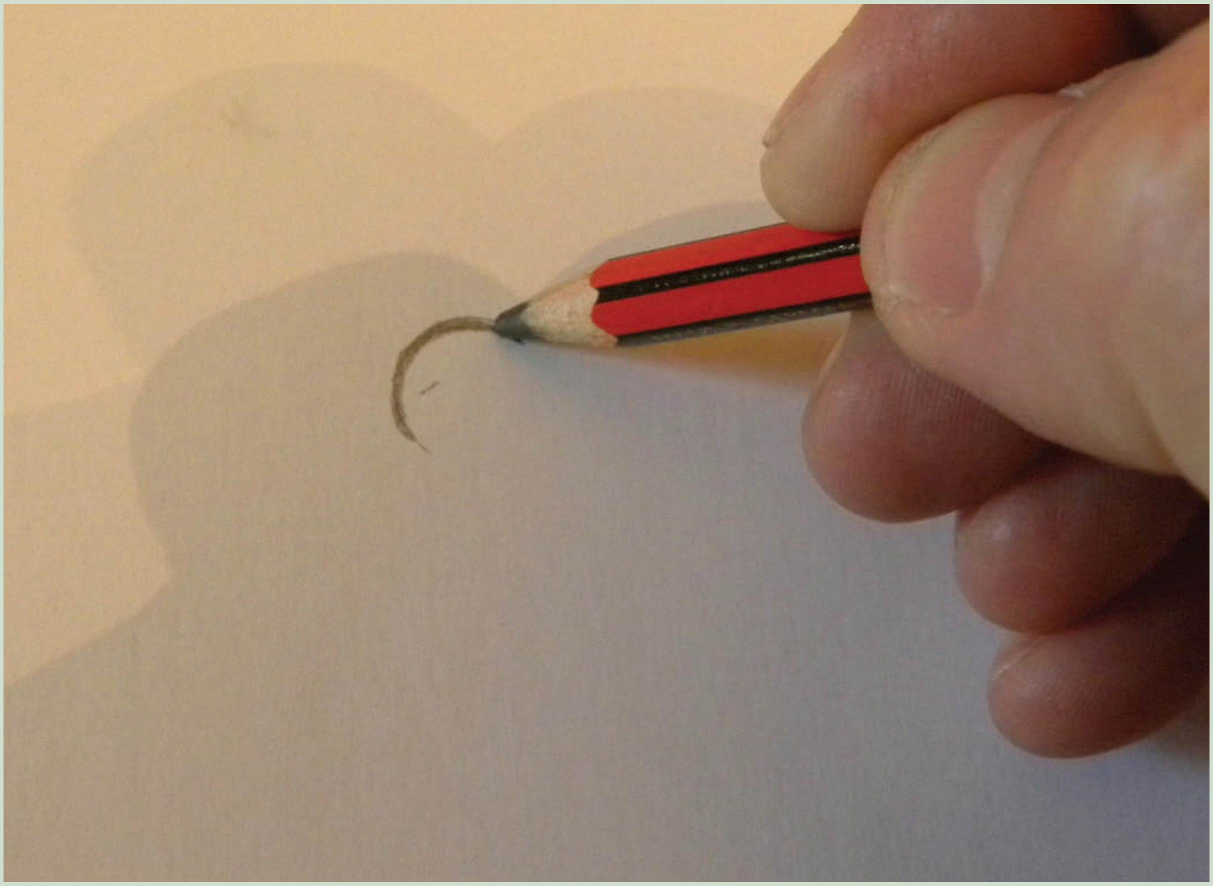


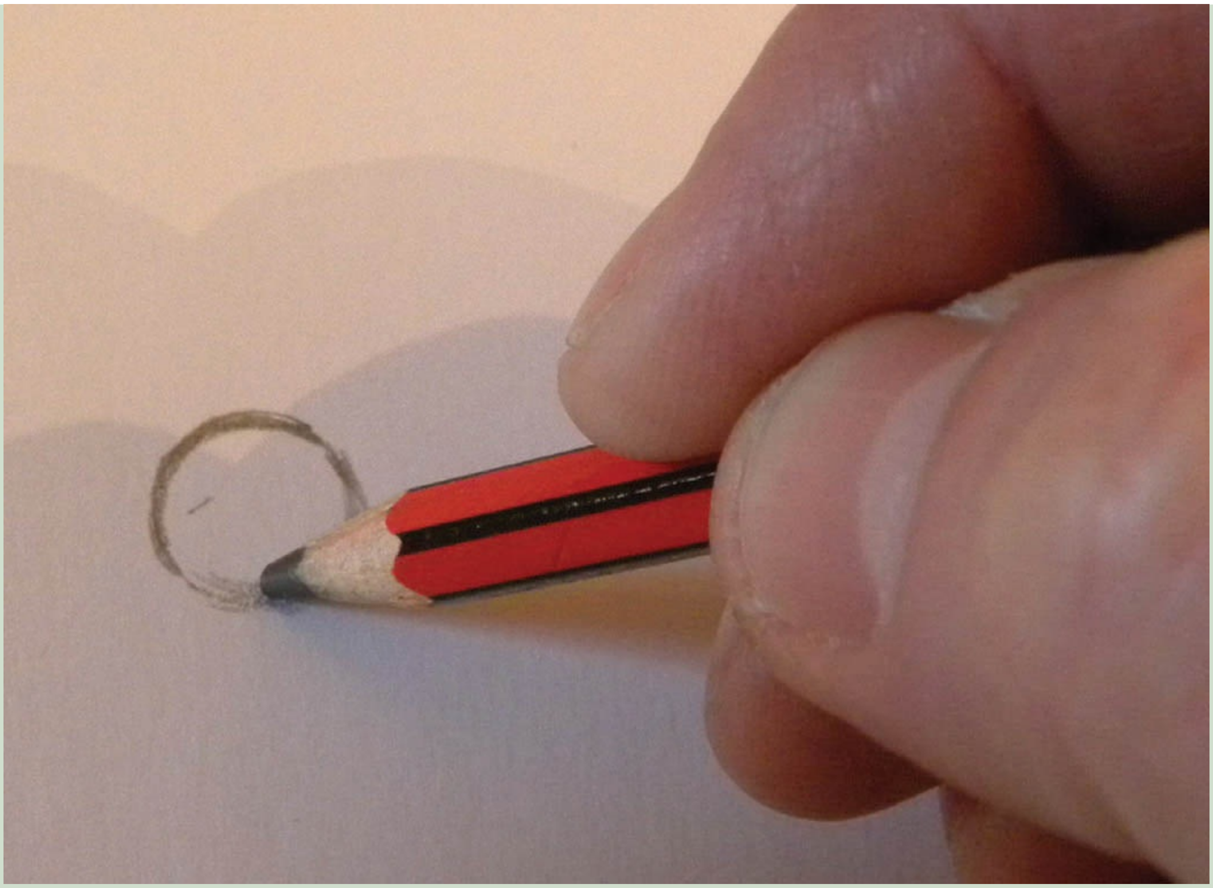
Simplified versions of two of the drawings on the previous page, showing how the outlines could be derived.

WARM-UP EXERCISE AND CONTROL PRACTICE

Constructive scribbling and doodling can be beneficial to good drawing and, besides being useful for practice, are also handy warming-up exercises prior to starting drawing. These simple activities give your hand–eye coordination a nice little workout and also break down the tricky transition movements we all have when drawing. By this I mean we all find drawing a curve much easier when we are ‘inside’ the curve (see above) but when we get to the point that we have to start pulling the pencil down towards us and then pushing away, the curve tends to lose its smoothness. Practising drawing circles helps to iron out this problem.

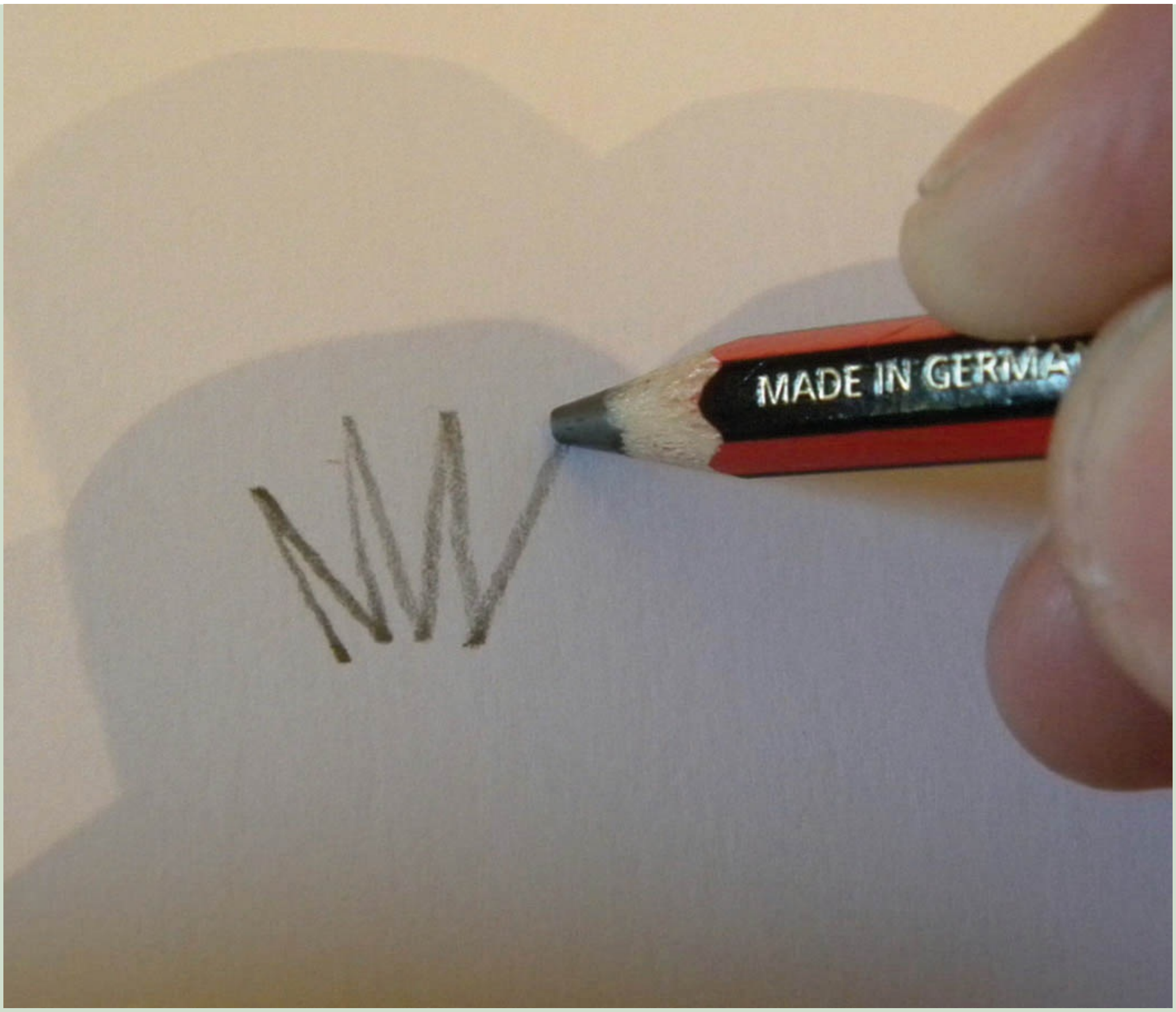
- Practise sketching the circle – making light approximations where you think the circle ought to be; only when you can see the circle, commit to a darker line. This use of light pencil marks is very useful where you are tentative about where the ‘true’ line ought to be and comes in handy when drawing from life.





Circle exercises.

- The next exercise is a step on from circle drawing and requires much greater dexterity and helps to develop the way you plan where your pencil is going to go, not just for the immediate line but also many lines ahead. You have to imagine two concentric circles and then use a radiating scribble to join the two together. You ought to be aiming for smooth outer and inner edges and evenly spaced spokes.
- Finally, the loop exercise brings together the previous disciplines, combining them into a practical and useful skill that has many applications in all types of drawing. You will be using a push and pull motion along two opposing diagonals, will have to visualize parallel lines and even curves and need to keep the strength of the lines and the overall shape of the finished loop nicely balanced. Practising this will improve your drawing and the way you see shapes on the canvas.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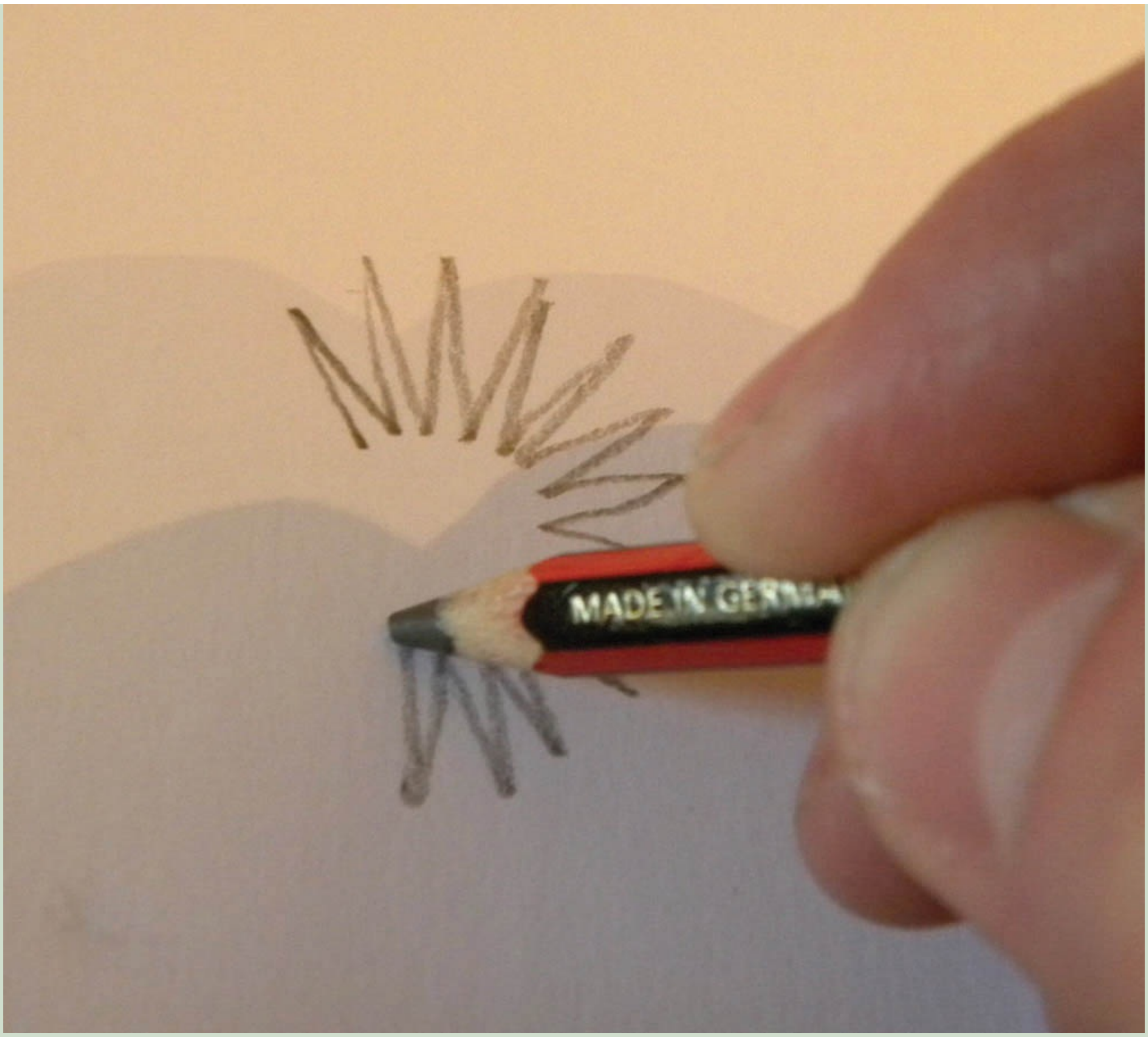

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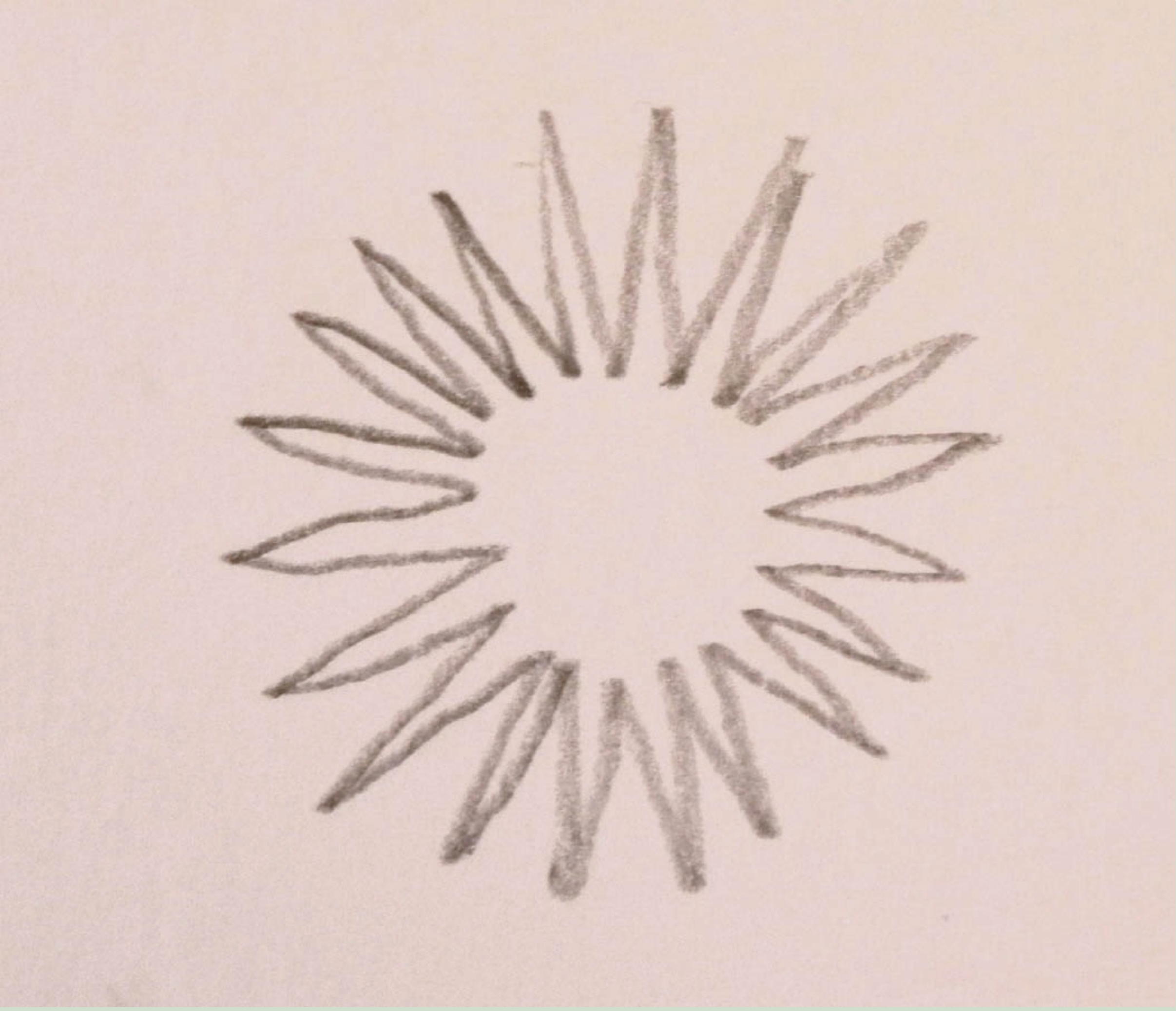
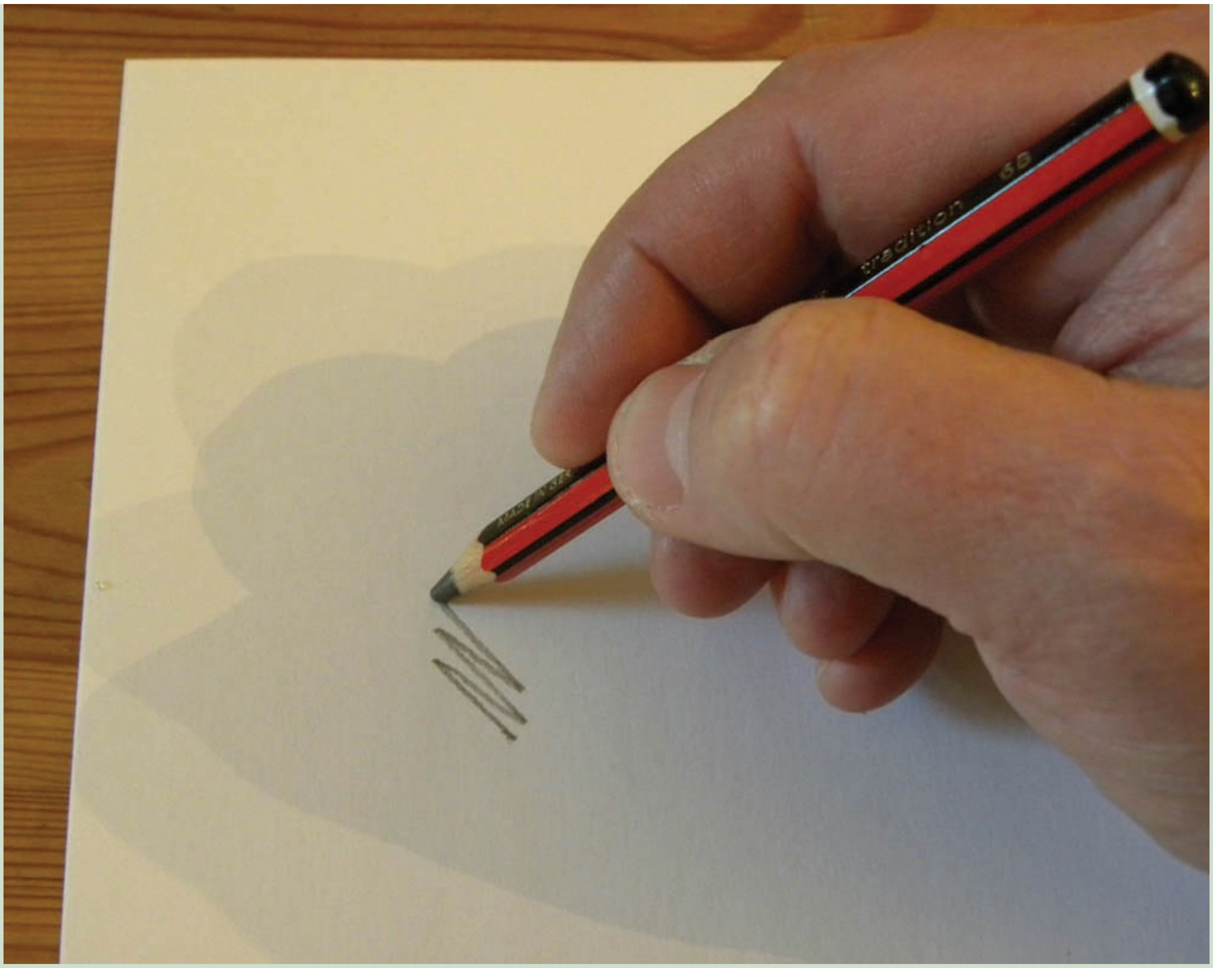


Star exercises: the edges of the spokes form two concentric circles.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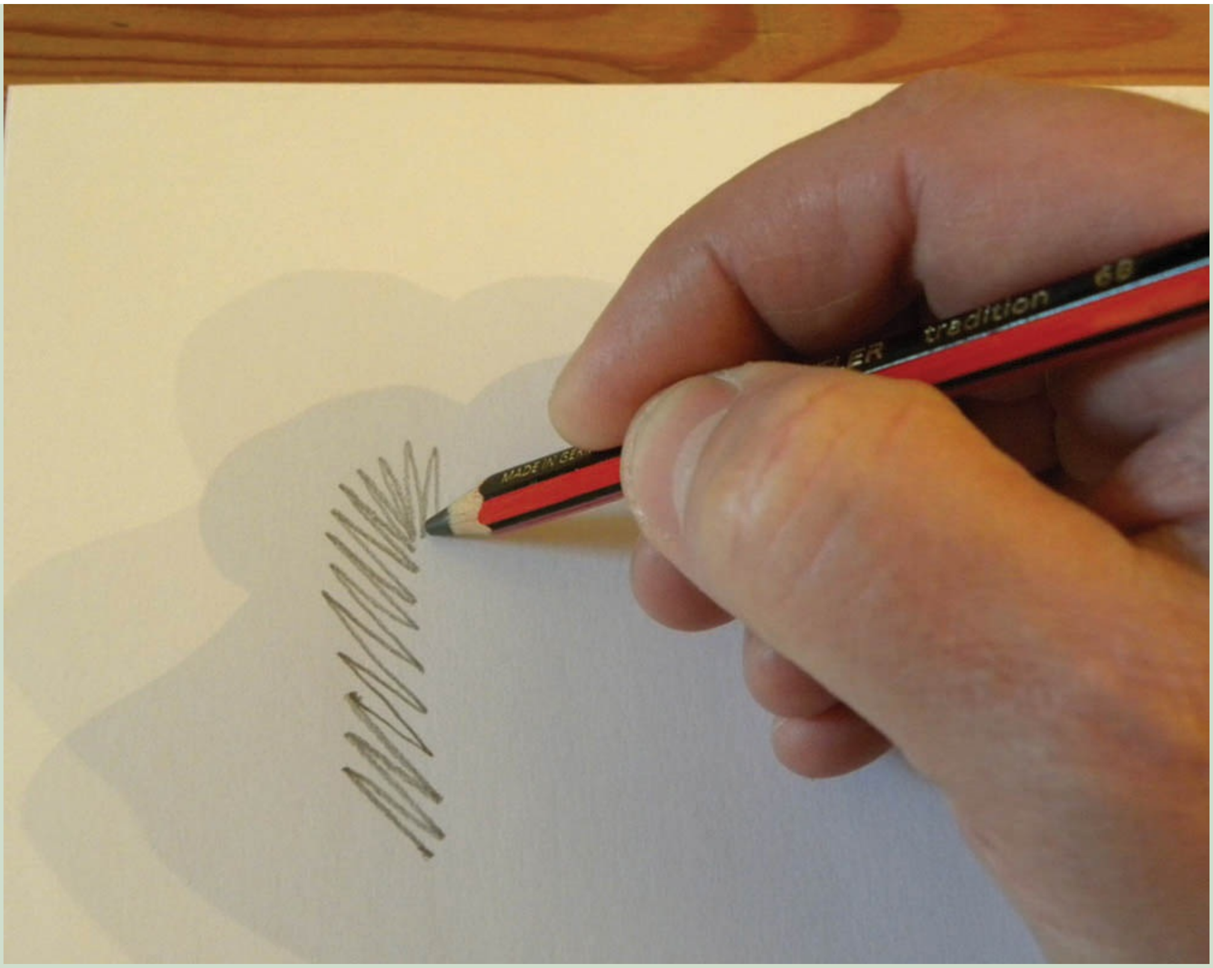
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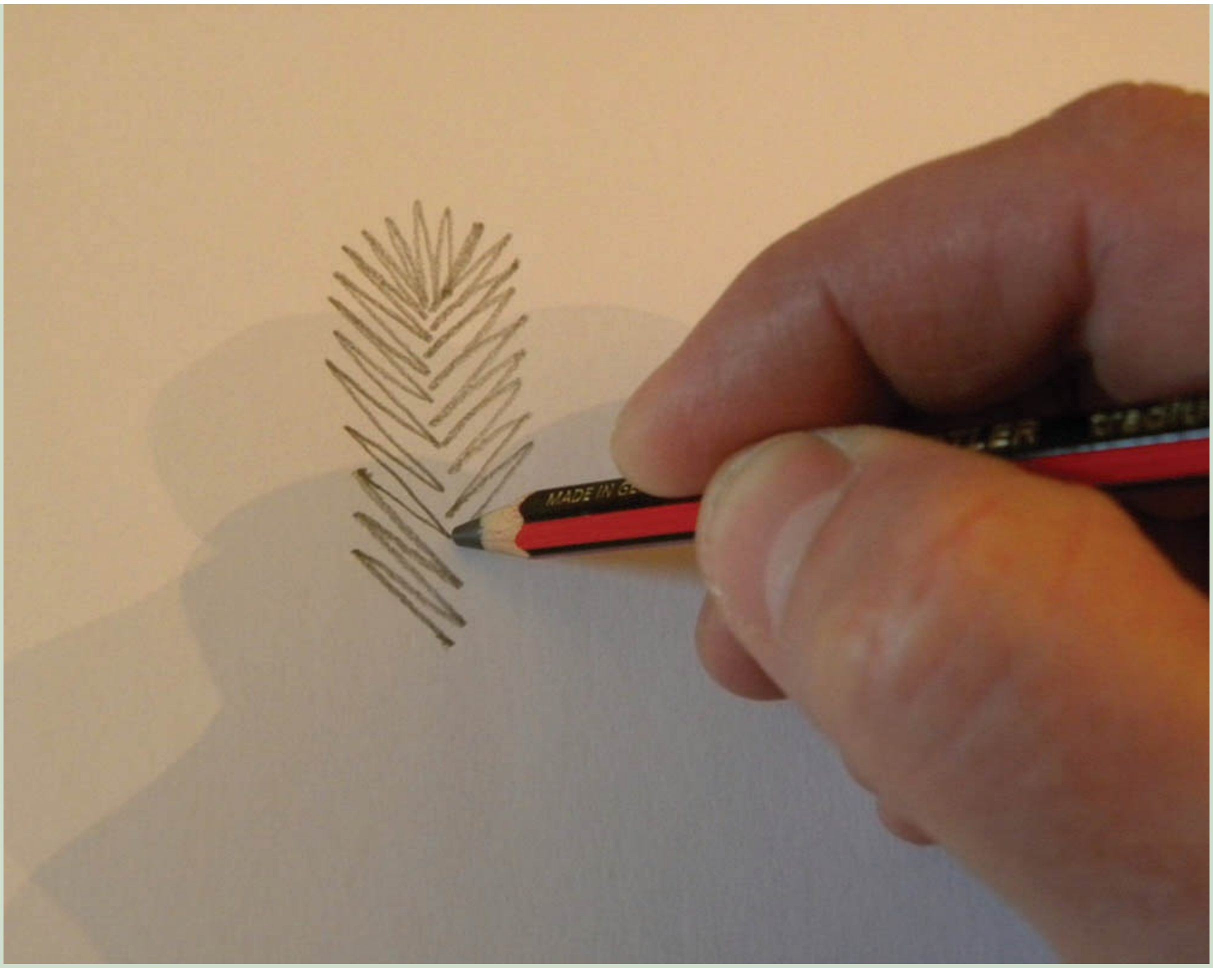
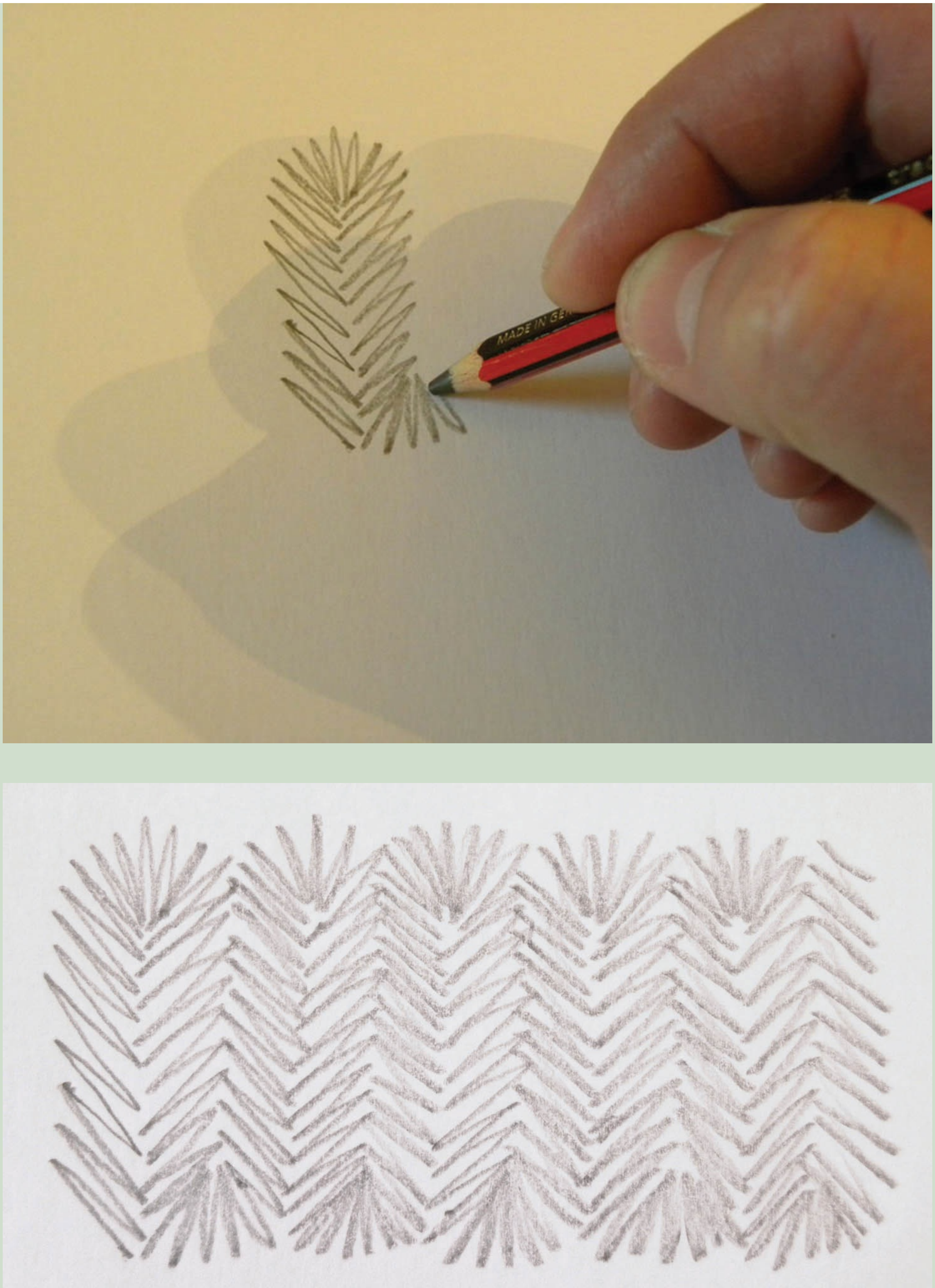




Loop exercises.

PHOTOGRAPHS

Photographs have been used by artists, both as reference and, occasionally, inspiration, since the process was invented. The Impressionists were quick to recognize its potential, together with landscape and portrait painters, and it has particular relevance to nature study and for the bird artist. For some artists the photograph should only ever be referred to as a last resort, perhaps to check a specific detail of plumage; for others the photograph may be the starting point and even the main inspiration for making a piece of art.

Opinions are divided regarding the use of photographs for reference and it is quite possible that artwork produced solely from photographic reference could be in danger of missing something – vitality, life, energy, for example. Perhaps more importantly though, recreating the photographic image without any attempt at interpretation may become the overriding aim for the artist at the expense of more creative aspirations. There is no doubt, however, that photographs certainly have a role to play in drawing and painting birds.

The suggestion to ‘draw what one sees, not what one knows to be there’ is a fine sentiment. But it depends on how well one can see the subject. I mean, a bird moving or performing a complex action such as preening under its tail, or wing and leg stretching, creates many unusual and perhaps unfamiliar shapes. Certainly a study of anatomy can help to disentangle the visual clutter that the artist is faced with, but from time to time, more detailed study of a particular process may be required. This is when photography – still and cinematic – can be a valuable resource.

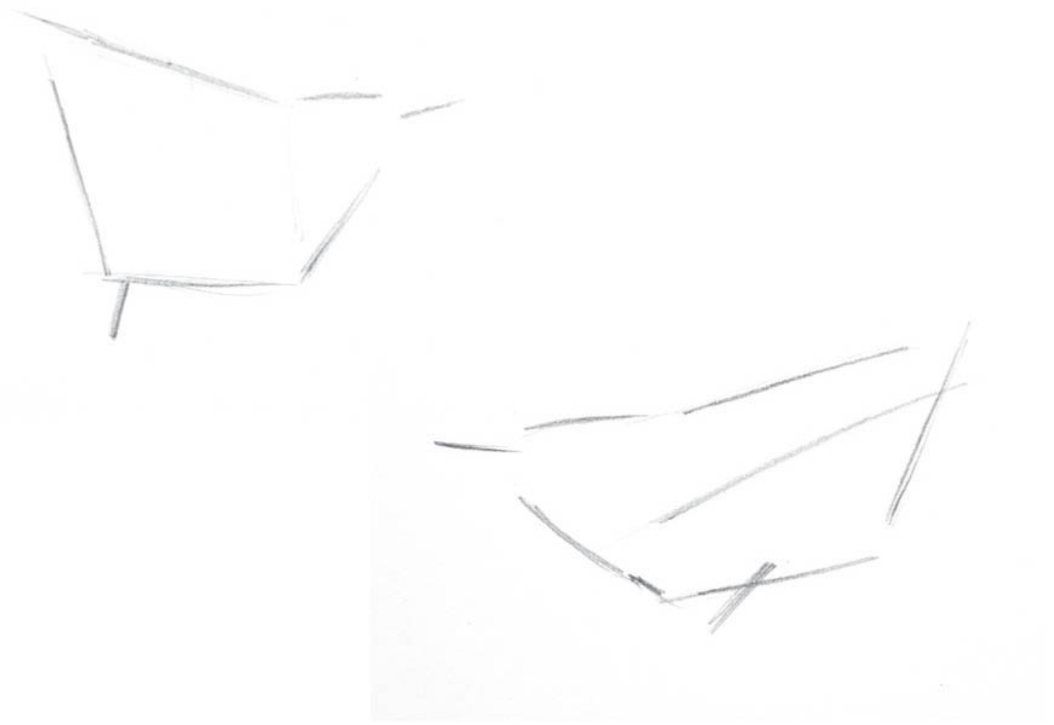
When we become familiar with which actions give rise to what general shapes by reference to photographic material, then these actions when observed in life will become more easily decipherable. To deny ourselves the use of photographs when we are trying to understand the structure of birds seems to me a puritanical line. After all, we knew nothing of the way birds’ wings perform in flight until the advent of slow-motion photography, and quadrupeds were assumed to gallop with two feet together. These aspects of biomechanics are now so ingrained in our consciousness that images of moving creatures painted prior to the revelations of movement seem ungainly and crude. We now accept these facts as truths and we need to acknowledge the work done by those photographic pioneers in discovering important aspects of movement.

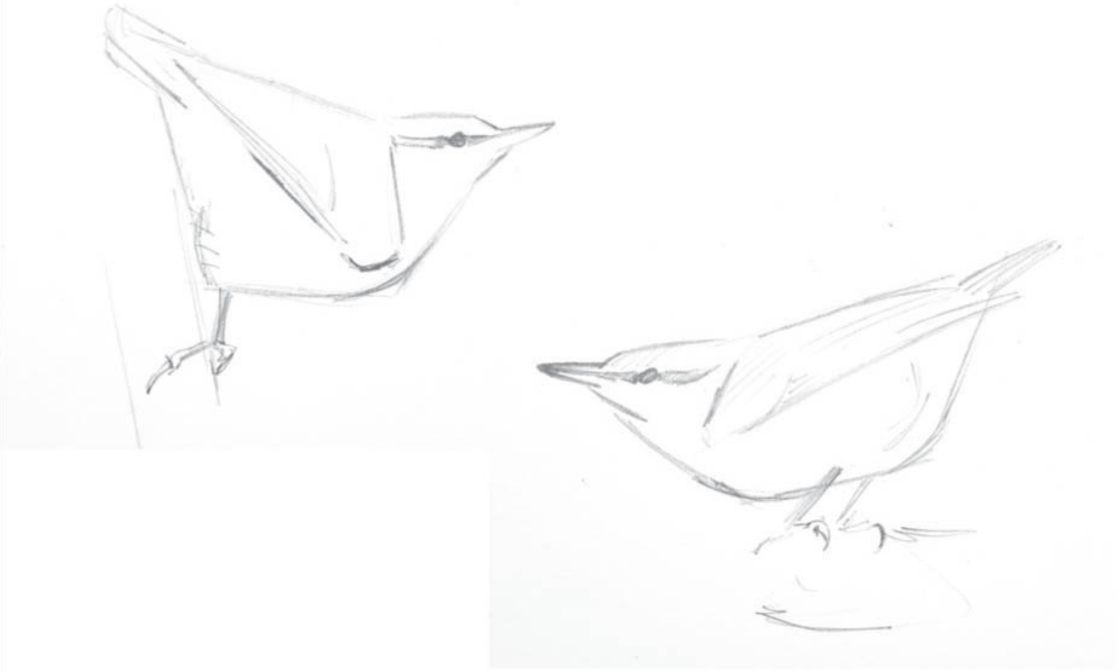
Regarding the use of photographic reference, here is what Robert Bateman (*Robert Bateman on Painting*) says on the subject:

> I could never understand why some artists shrank from using photographs. Many, many years ago, I can remember students asking in hushed tones, ‘Is it all right to use photographs?’ I have never heard of a good reason not to. One person said that it could make your work tight and inexpressive. Well, my wife uses photos for her painting and she is a bold, abstract artist and very expressive. Others whose work is loose and free and painterly do as well. In fact, in the last several decades I don’t ever hear that question. Everybody uses photographs if they are at all interested in realism. Even modernists and postmodernists such as Warhol, Rauschenberg and Richter show photo-based paintings which are in the collections of big city museums.

EXERCISE USING PHOTOGRAPHS OF A NUTHATCH

Adrian Dancy: photographs of a nuthatch.

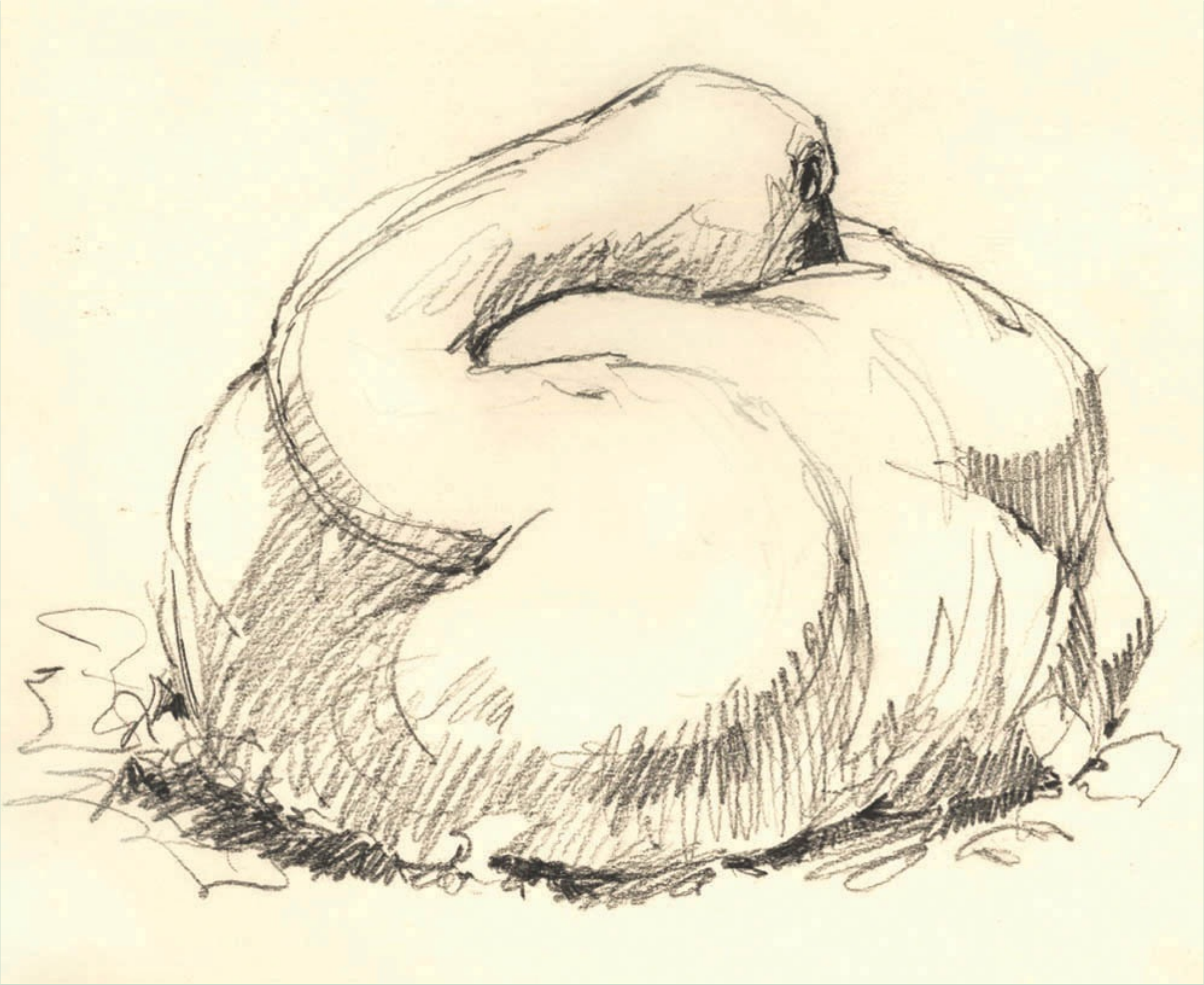




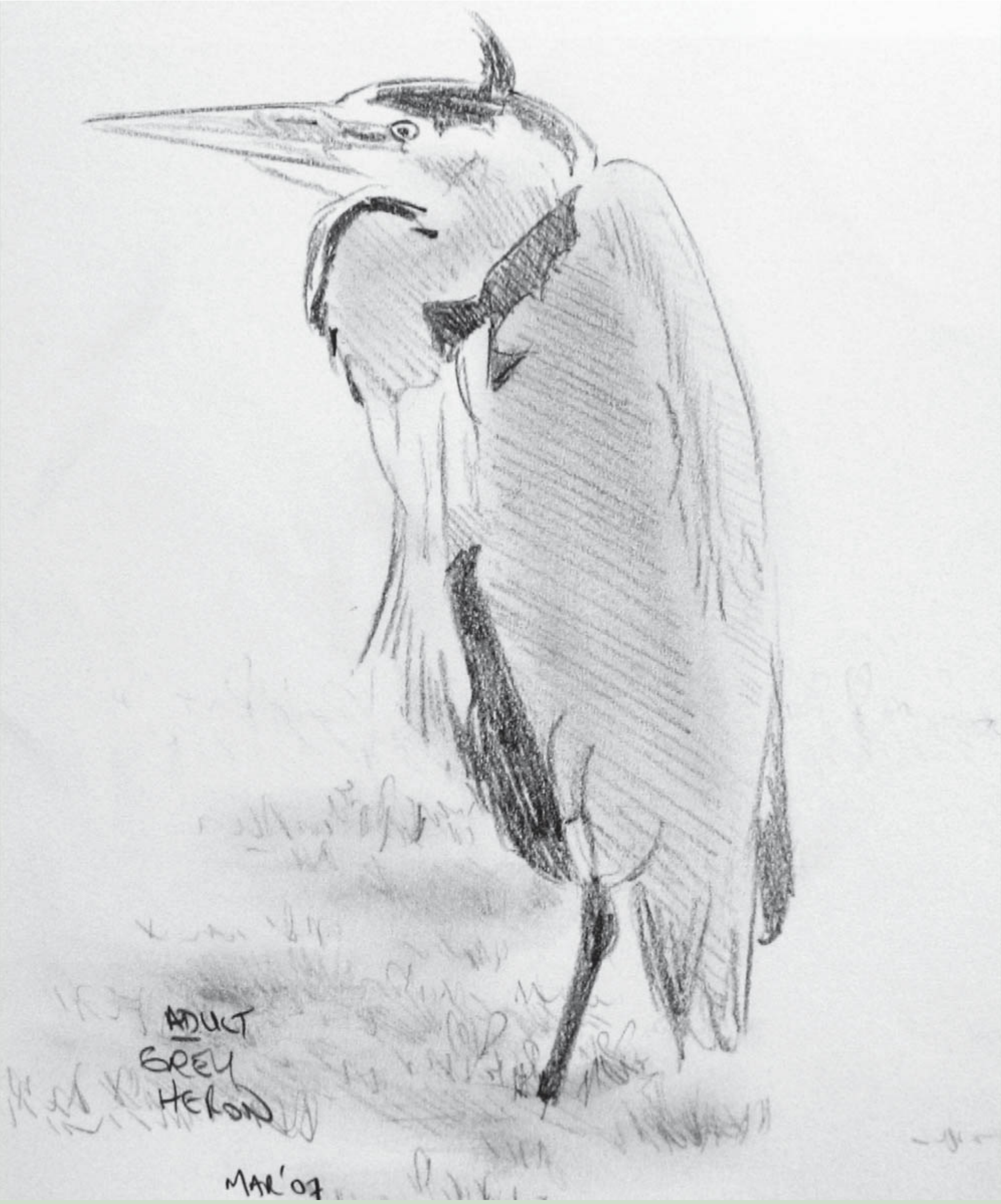
Tim Wootton: construction drawings of a nuthatch.

Look for the major shapes that contain the form and describe the main areas of structure and light/dark. Follow the construction drawings and notice how they relate to the shapes on the actual bird. The second stage has a few more lines expressing a little bit of detail.

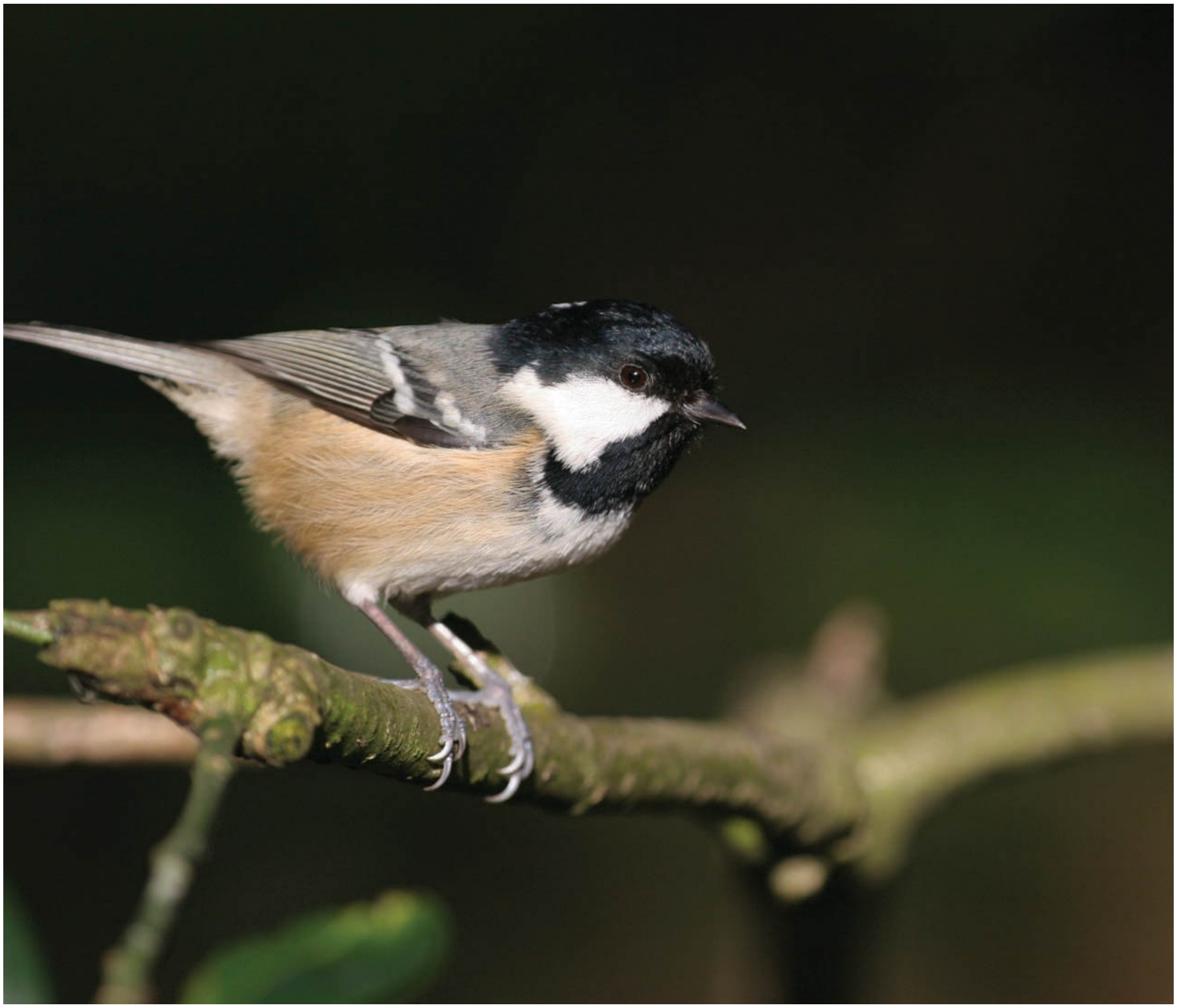
Try this approach to interpret photographs and then, once you've built up your confidence in working out what and where the main shapes are and your ability to draw them accurately, take your sketchbook outside and see how the technique translates from a flat and inert image to a three-dimensional one. Choose birds that are settled and fairly motionless so you have time to work out the shapes and build up your confidence.



Debby Kaspari: tundra swan. Drawing made directly from the sleeping bird.



Alan Dalton: grey heron. Large birds can be excellent models, particularly if they remain fairly still. In both of these studies, linear hatching is employed in the shadows. Alan also uses his fingers to smudge the pencil, representing another tone with different properties.



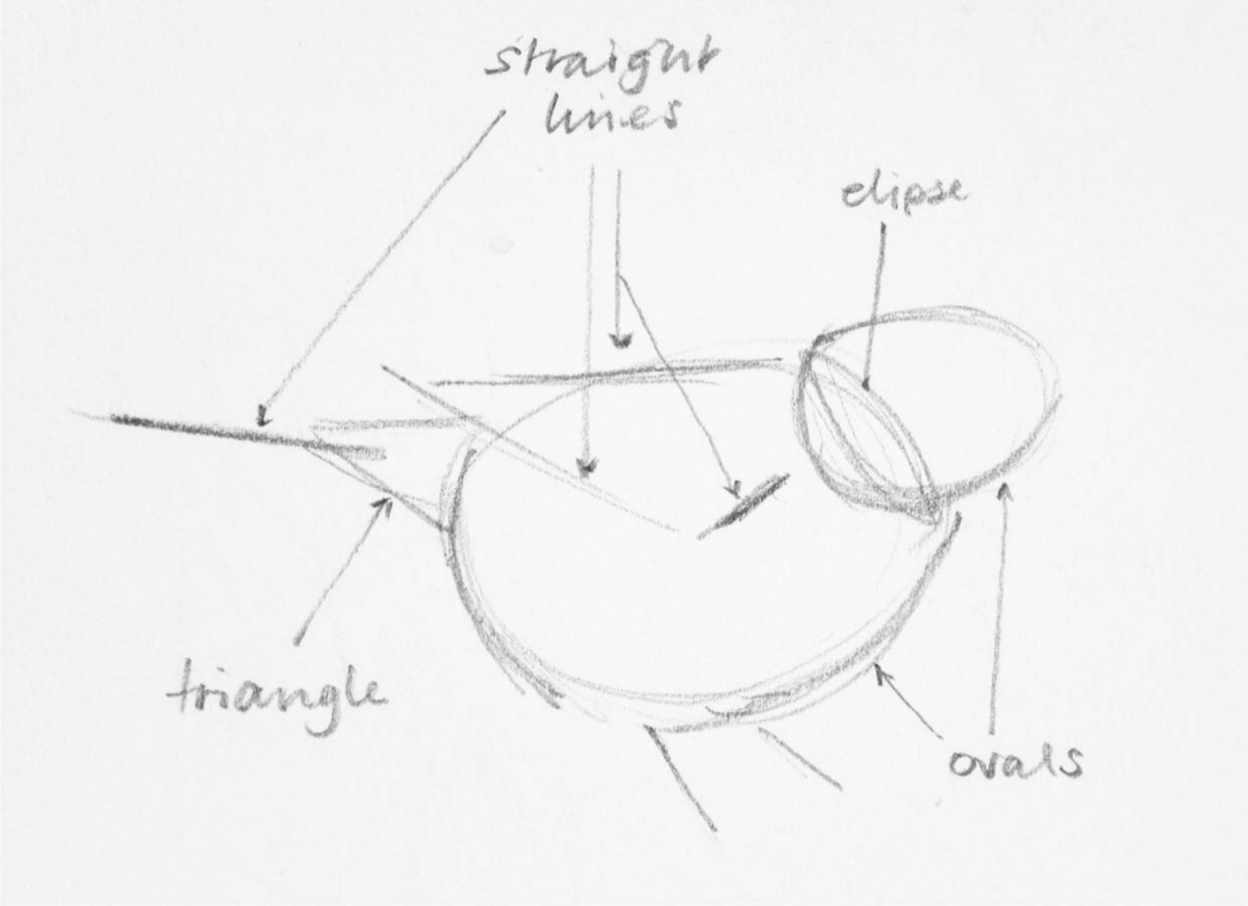
Adrian Dancy: photograph of a coal tit.

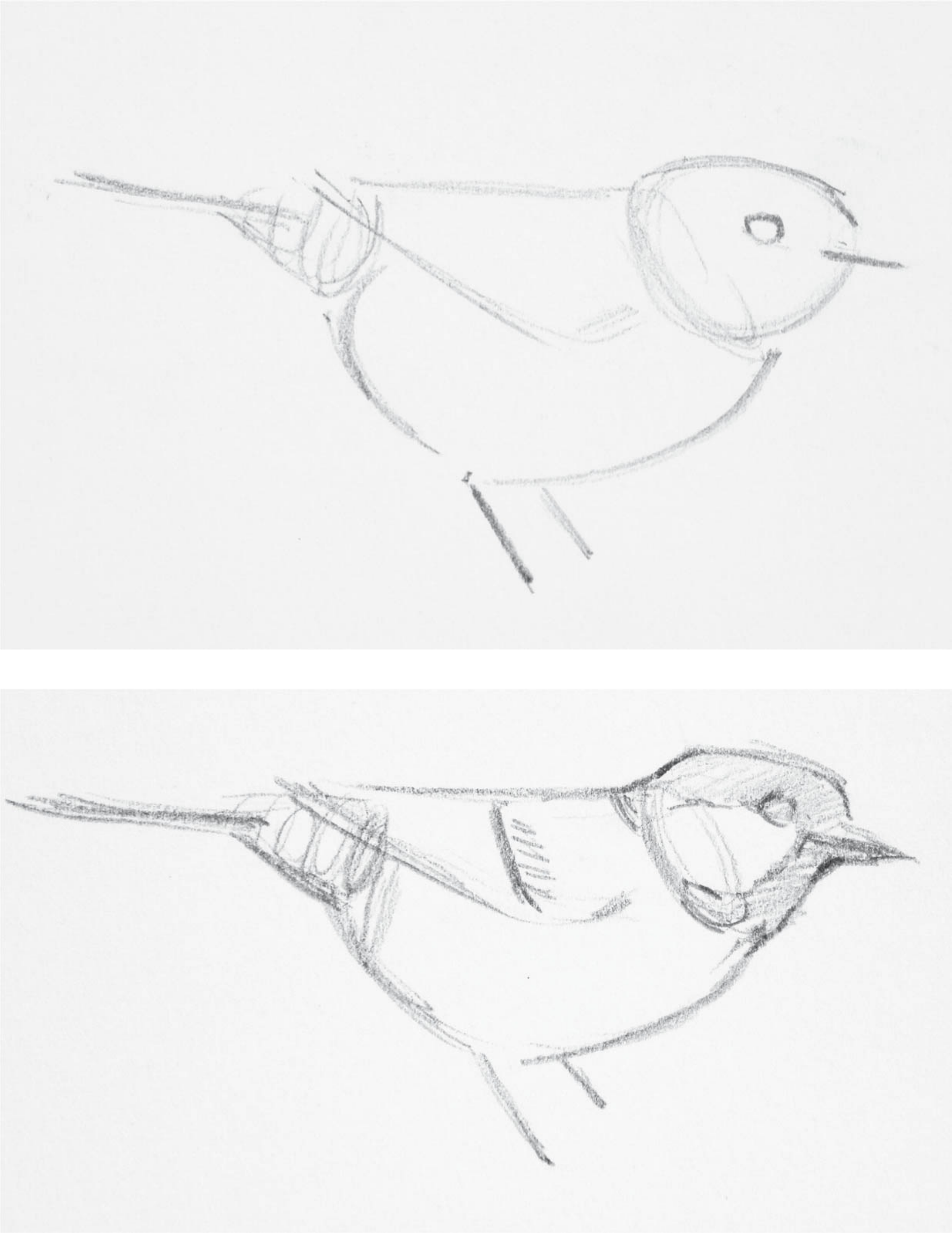
Interpreting photographs

If you want to use photographs I would advocate you spend much time studying from life also – photographs will then have added meaning to them and you will understand the printed image better. You will start to see around the subject, recognizing that the form of the bird continues around the invisible side; you will understand that the edges of the bird are just changes in plane and reflect light differently. Without this insight your bird will look like a cut-out, superimposed on your chosen background. However, in this specific case (that is, a tutorial in a book), when illustrating how to select lines to define shape, form and structure of a bird, there really is no alternative to using photographs – unless each copy of this book is to be shipped with a caged bird!

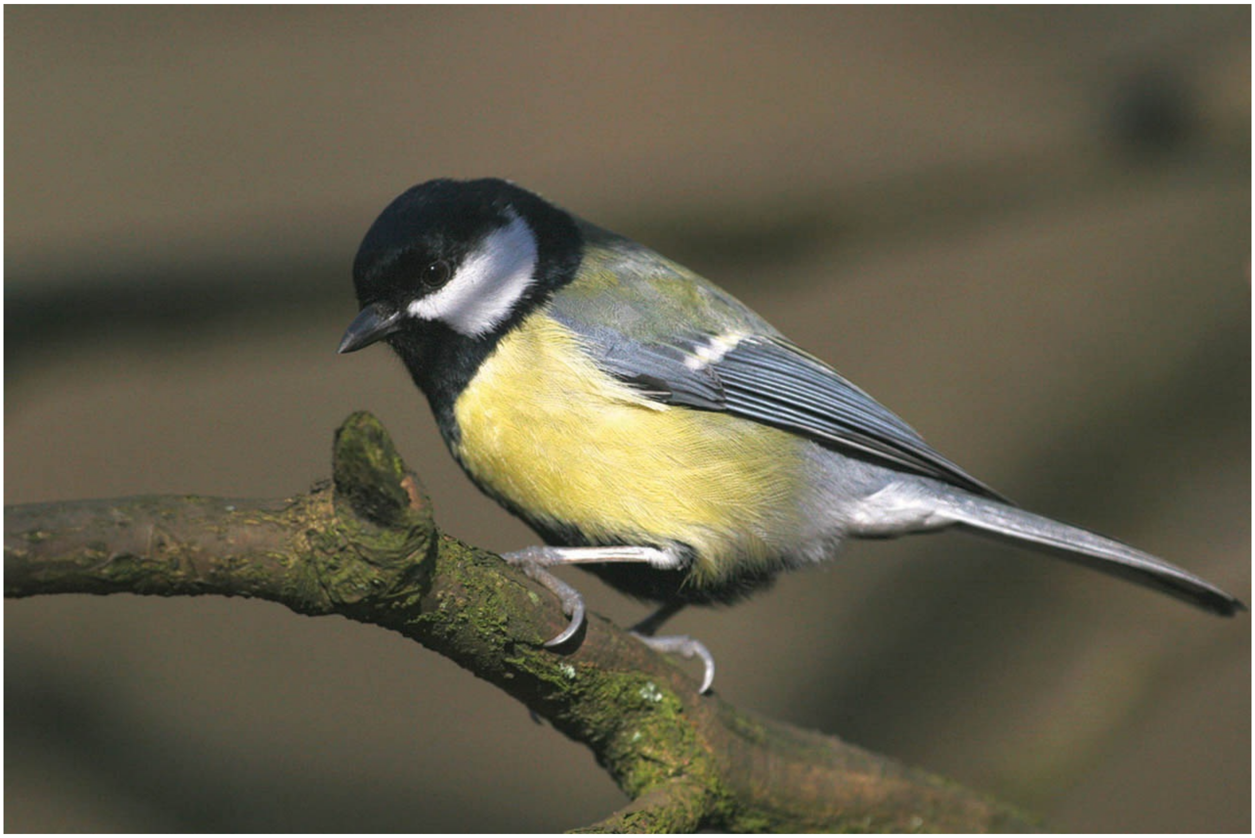
Look at the photograph of a small bird (a coal tit, found throughout Europe; there are similar species in North America called chickadees) and decide which lines could be simplified into curves and straights. Also pay close attention to the salient intersections and angles. By breaking down the major structures into these simple lines and shapes, notice how few lines can be used to draw the bird.

Because of the arrangement of feathers on the body, it can be difficult to ascertain just how the important bits of anatomy fit together and it is tempting to try to draw these elements first. Getting the general overall shape ought to be the priority; the elements of detail can be gradually added.





Tim Wootton: coal tit.

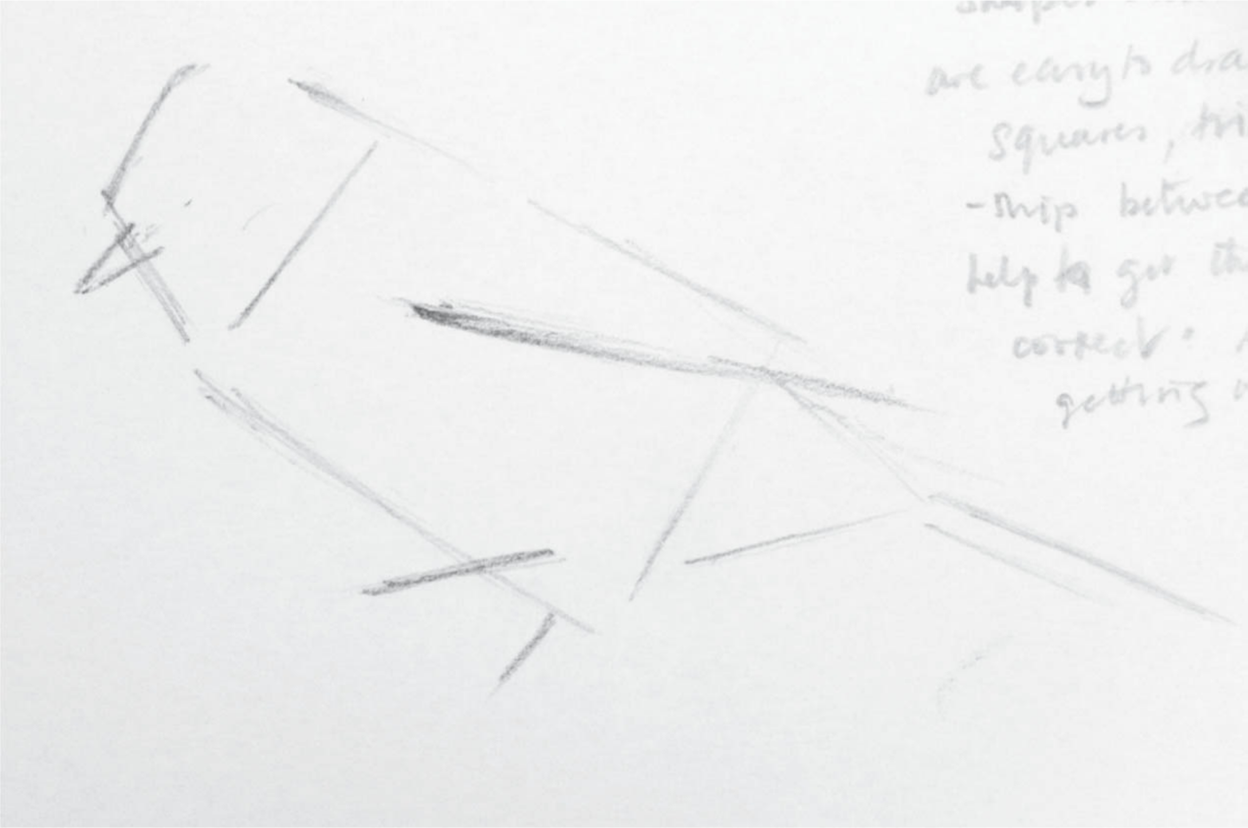


Adrian Dancy: photograph of a great tit.

IDENTIFYING AND DRAWING SHAPES WITHIN A BIRD

We are all familiar with the two-circle approach to drawing birds – a large circle for the body and a smaller one for the head. However, in many cases this basic anatomy can be replaced by a different kind of geometry. Squares and triangles can depict form with a sensitivity that may be quite unforeseen (and at a later stage, cubes and cones can be substituted to enhance three-dimensional qualities).

First spend a little time observing your subject, paying attention to the relative proportions of head and body. Look for strong lines where the bird’s plumage changes in colour, value or texture (different feather types) such as collars and moustache lines and how these may relate to underlying anatomical features. With many birds the feathers around the neck show a distinct line when the bird’s head turns. Observe where this line of separation is and mark it on your drawing – it can be an important feature when you come to expressing the character of the bird.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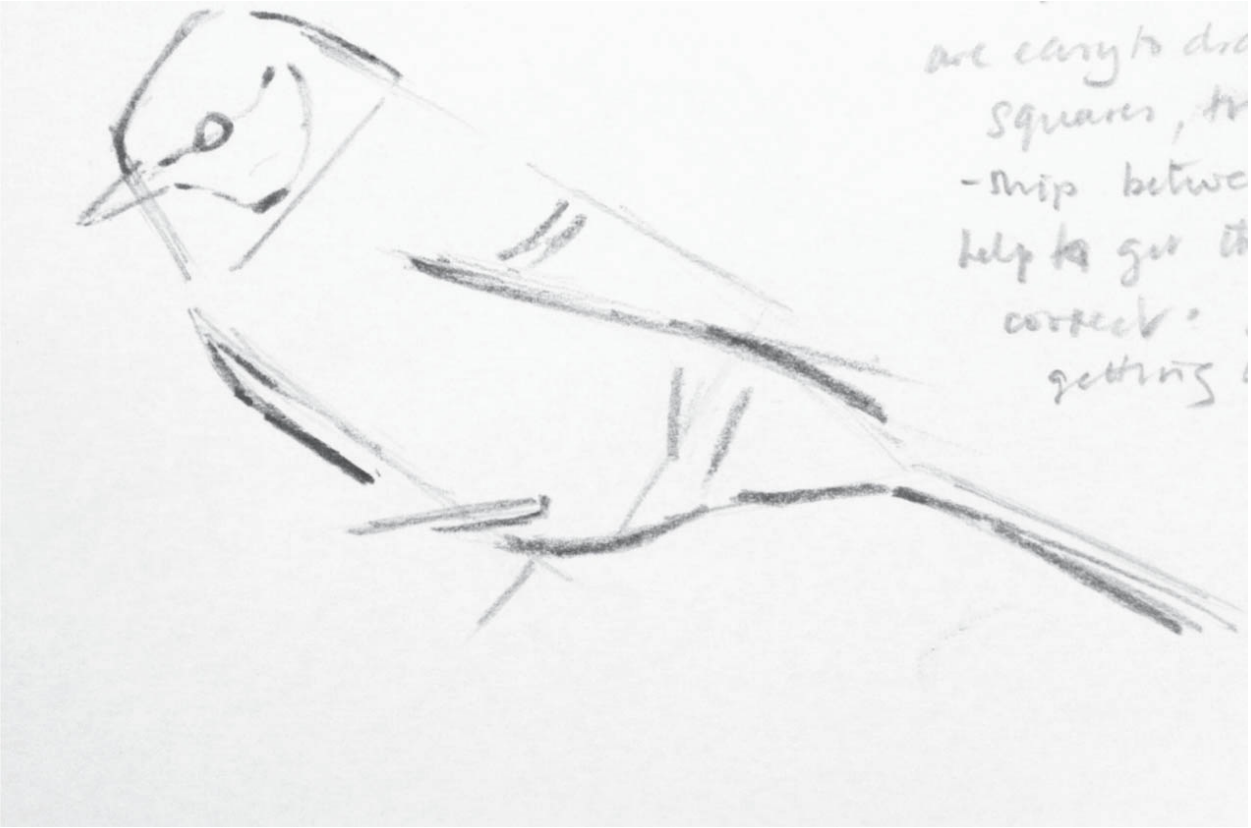
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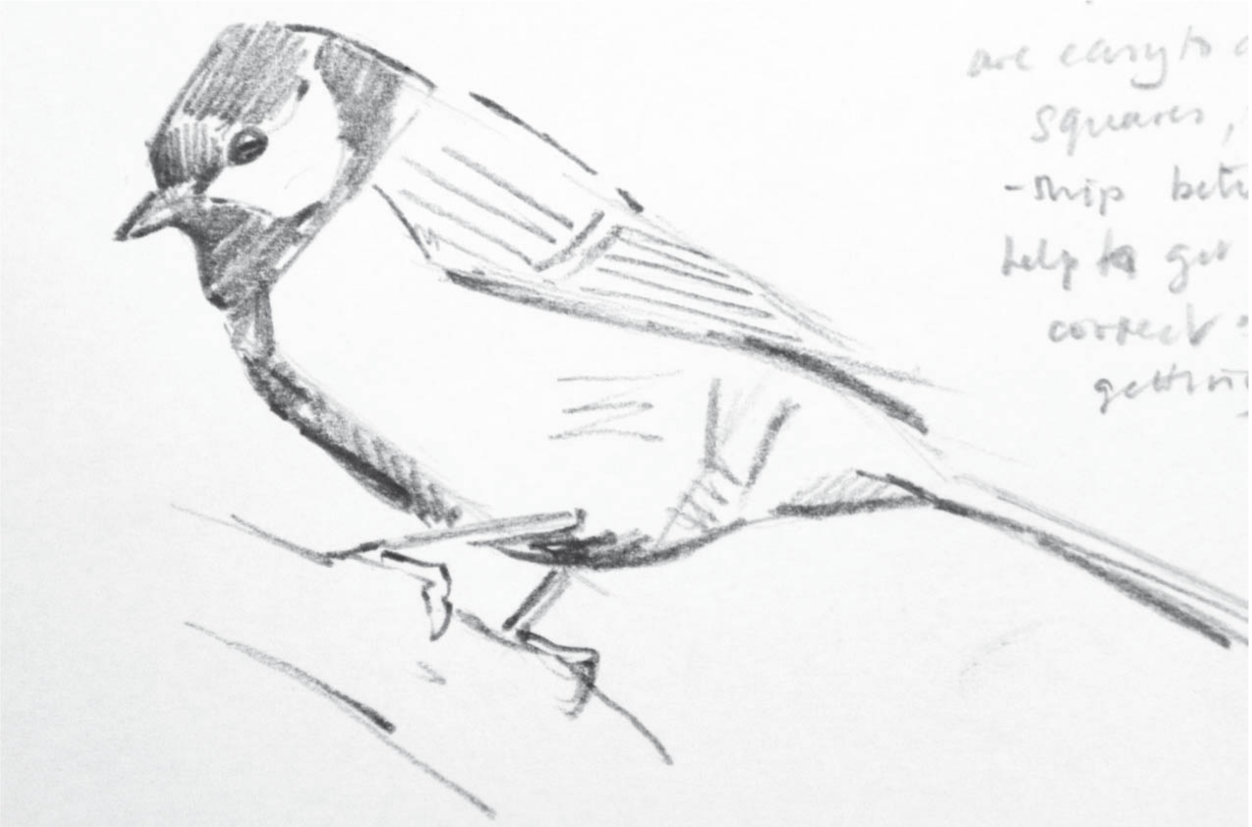
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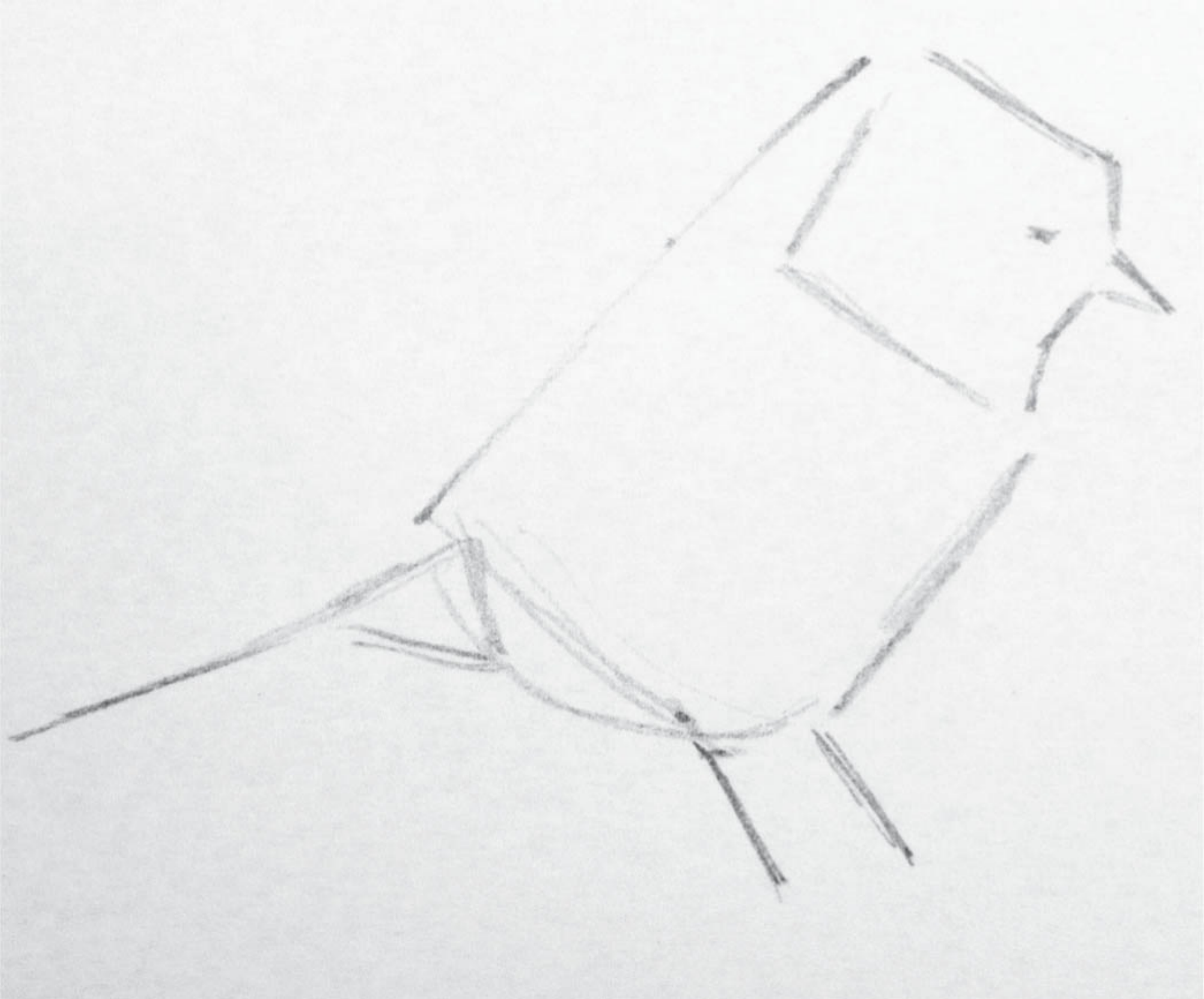
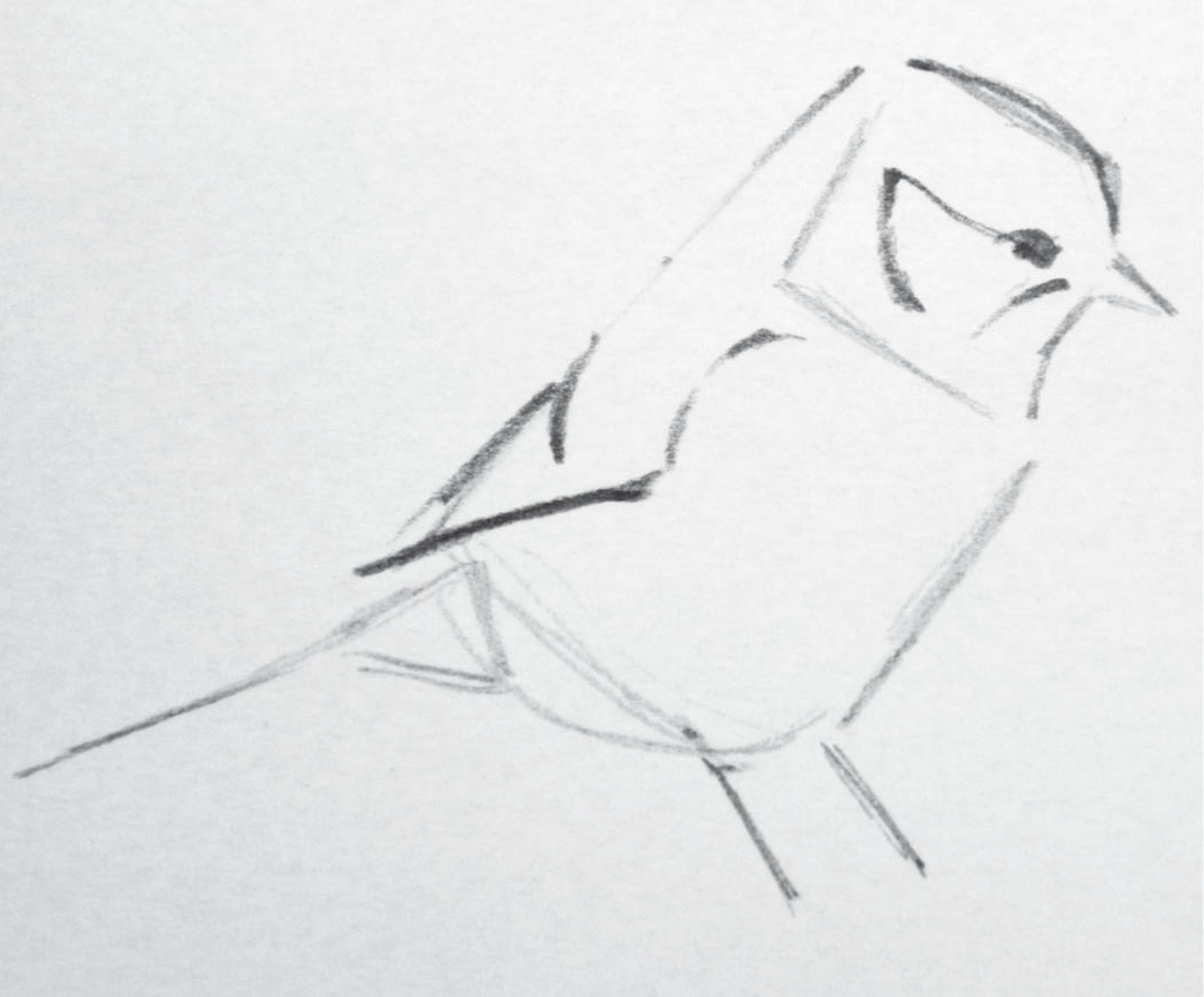
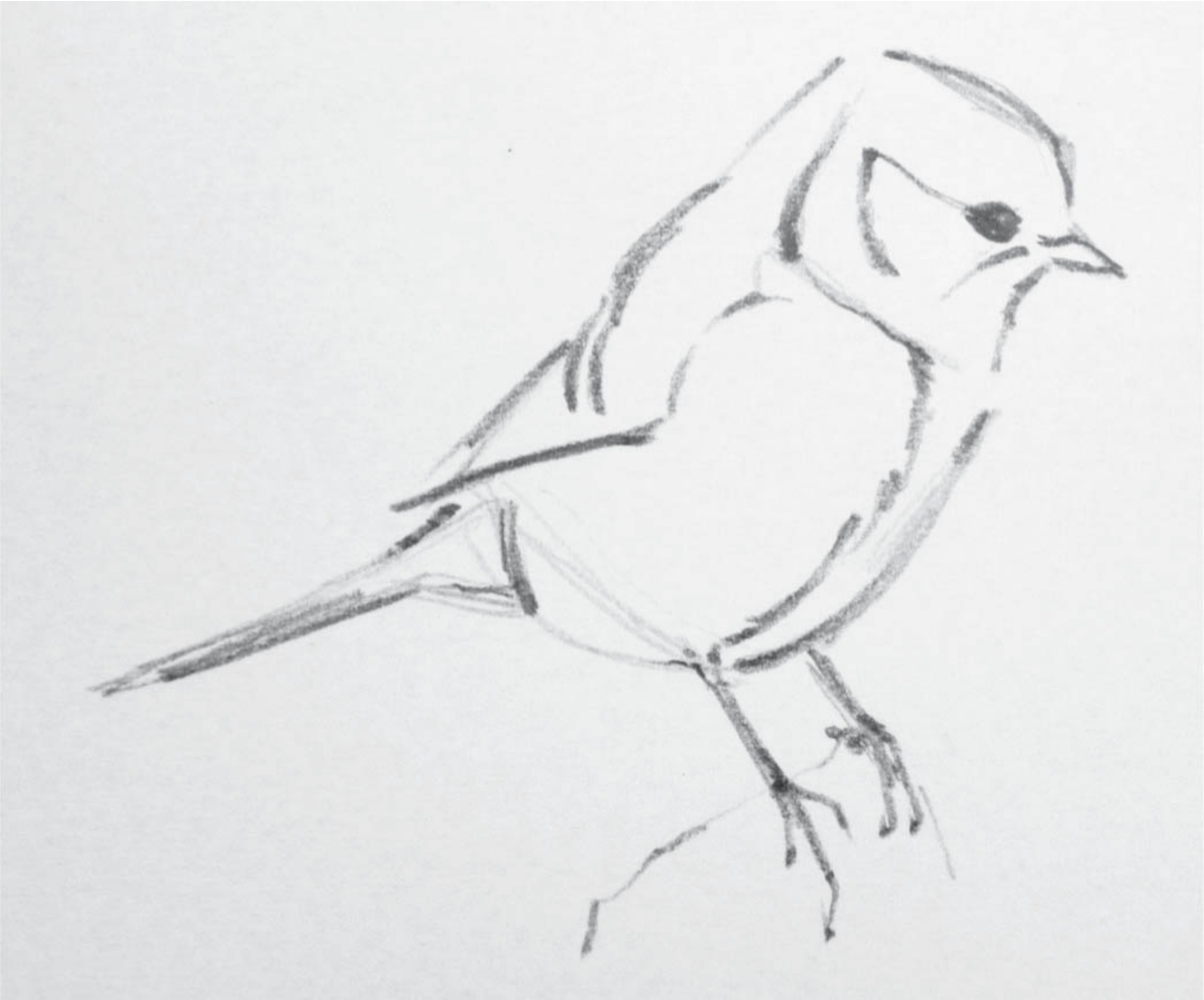
A point about these drawings: you may notice that the white cheek of the great tit has a dark line running across it, yet I haven’t included that feature in the sketch. We’ve discussed two points: one is to look at your subject in real life; the other is the aspect of interpreting photographs. In real life a great tit doesn’t have this stripe across the cheek – watching the birds will tell you this, and by interpreting the photograph I can see that the stripe is actually a shadow of a branch. It makes the bird look unusual, so I’ve deliberately left it out of the sketch.

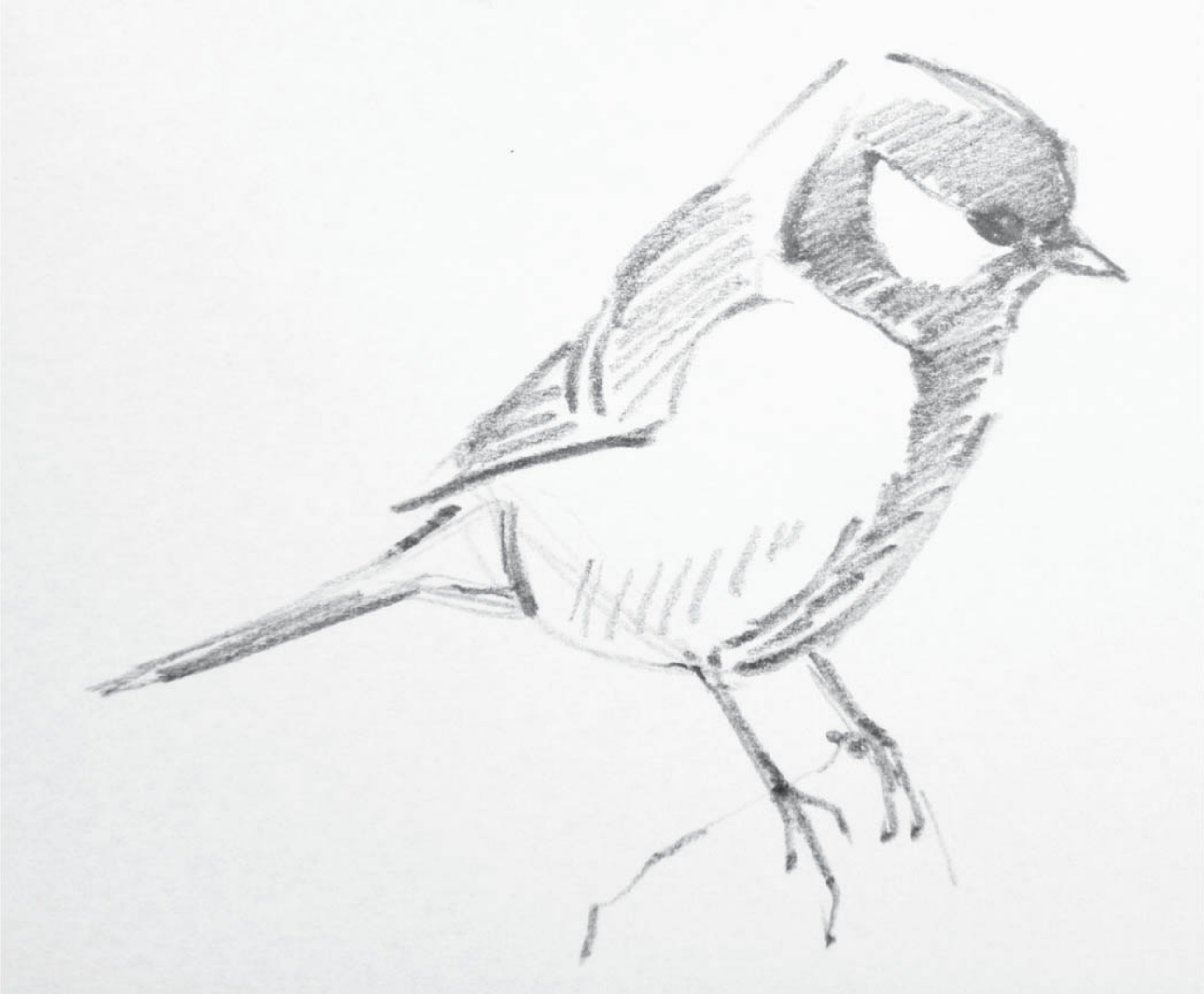
When you start to put down a few lines try to visualize the point of balance of the bird. Legs needn’t be detailed, but a suggestion of where they emerge from the soft belly feathers and at what point they connect with earth or branch will help your drawing to stand properly – a very important aspect to your drawing and essential for making convincing studies.

Adrian Dancy: photograph of a great tit.

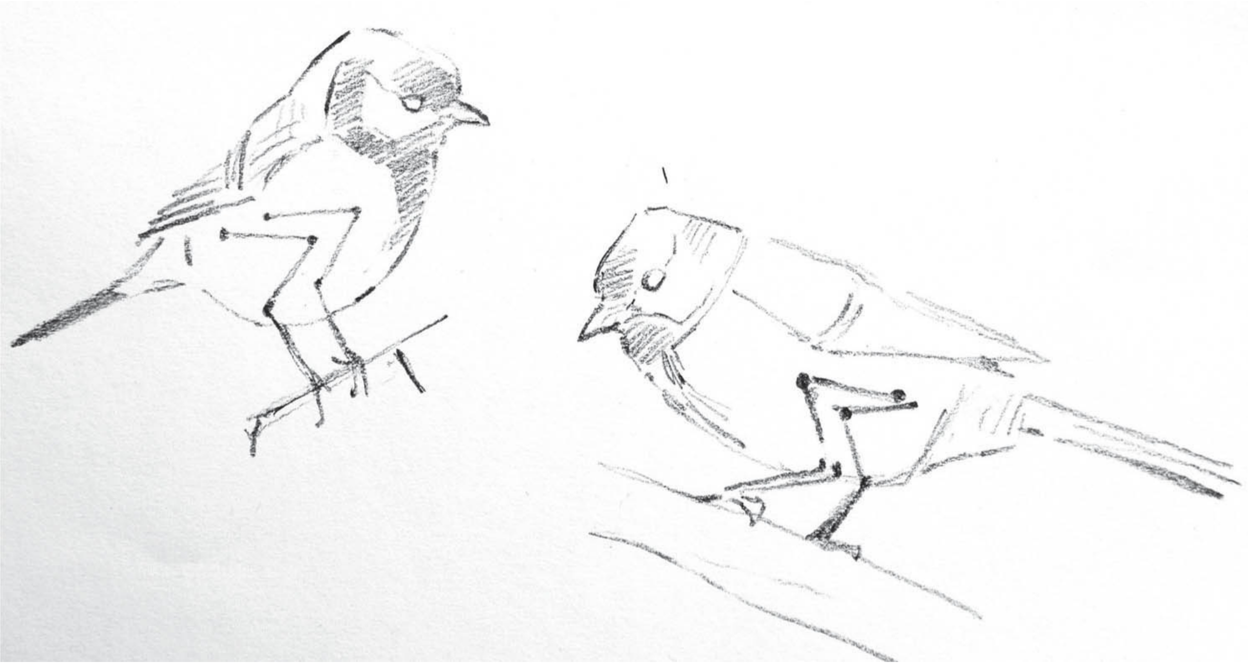








Tim Wootton: drawings of the great tit.

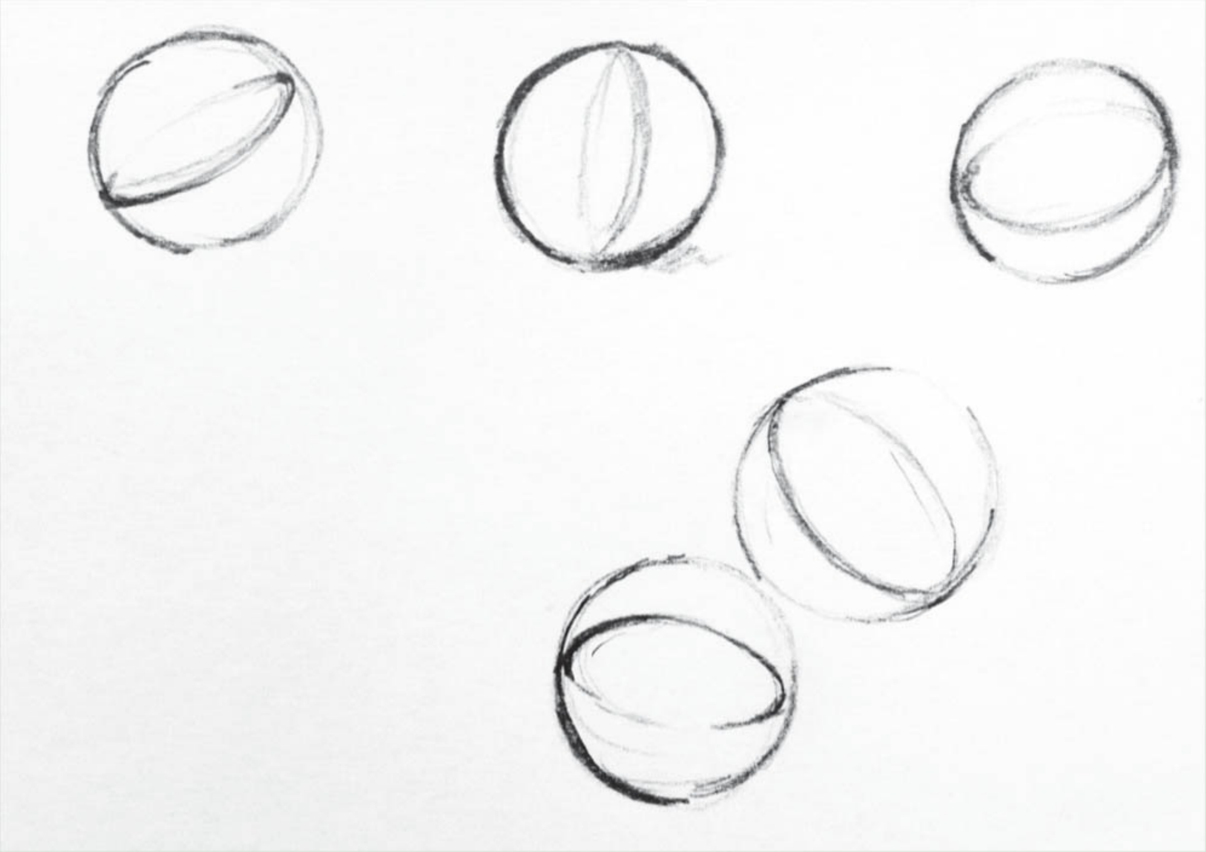


Imagined leg positions in perching birds.

At this point it’s worth having some idea about the internal structures of the bird. The sketch below shows the position and shape of the legs underneath the feathers and where they attach at the pelvis (more of which in the next chapter).

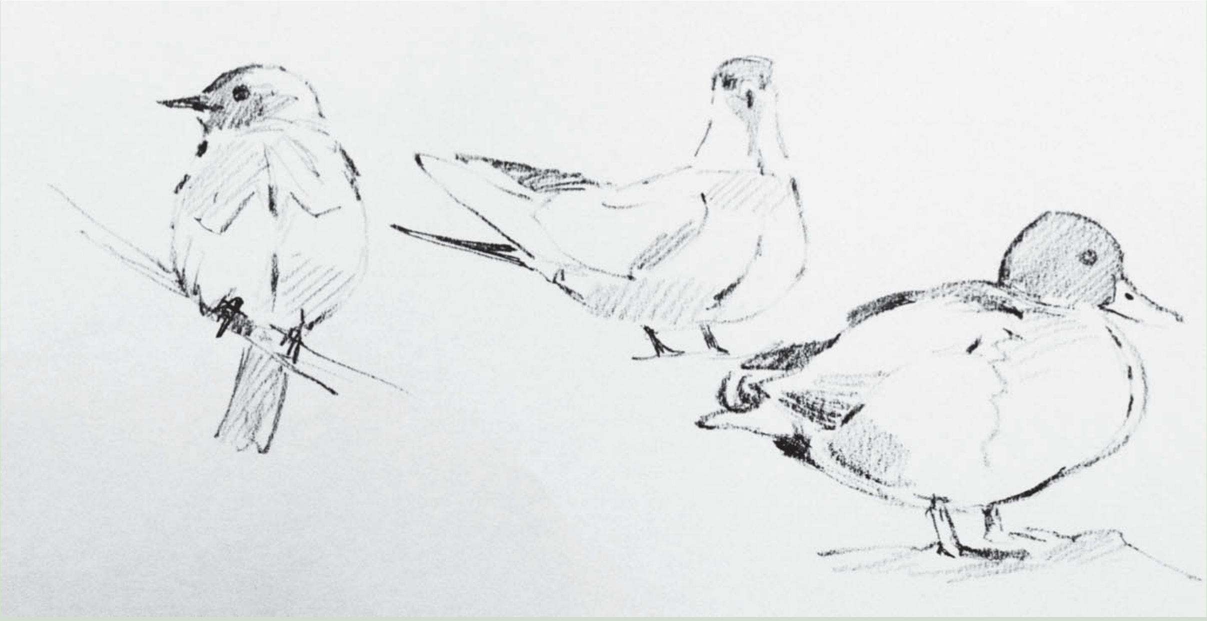
EXERCISE: DRAWING THE CENTRE LINE OF A SPHERE

One way to get the feel of balance is by drawing a series of spheres and then deciding where a centre line where both hemispheres are joined (the seam or equator). Sketch the ‘visible’ side of the seam as it curves around the ball. Imagine the spheres are transparent and continue the ellipse around the back of the ball. Try drawing the seam at different angles and from a range of perspectives. Visualizing the centre line of a ball is a step towards seeing and drawing objects in three dimensions.

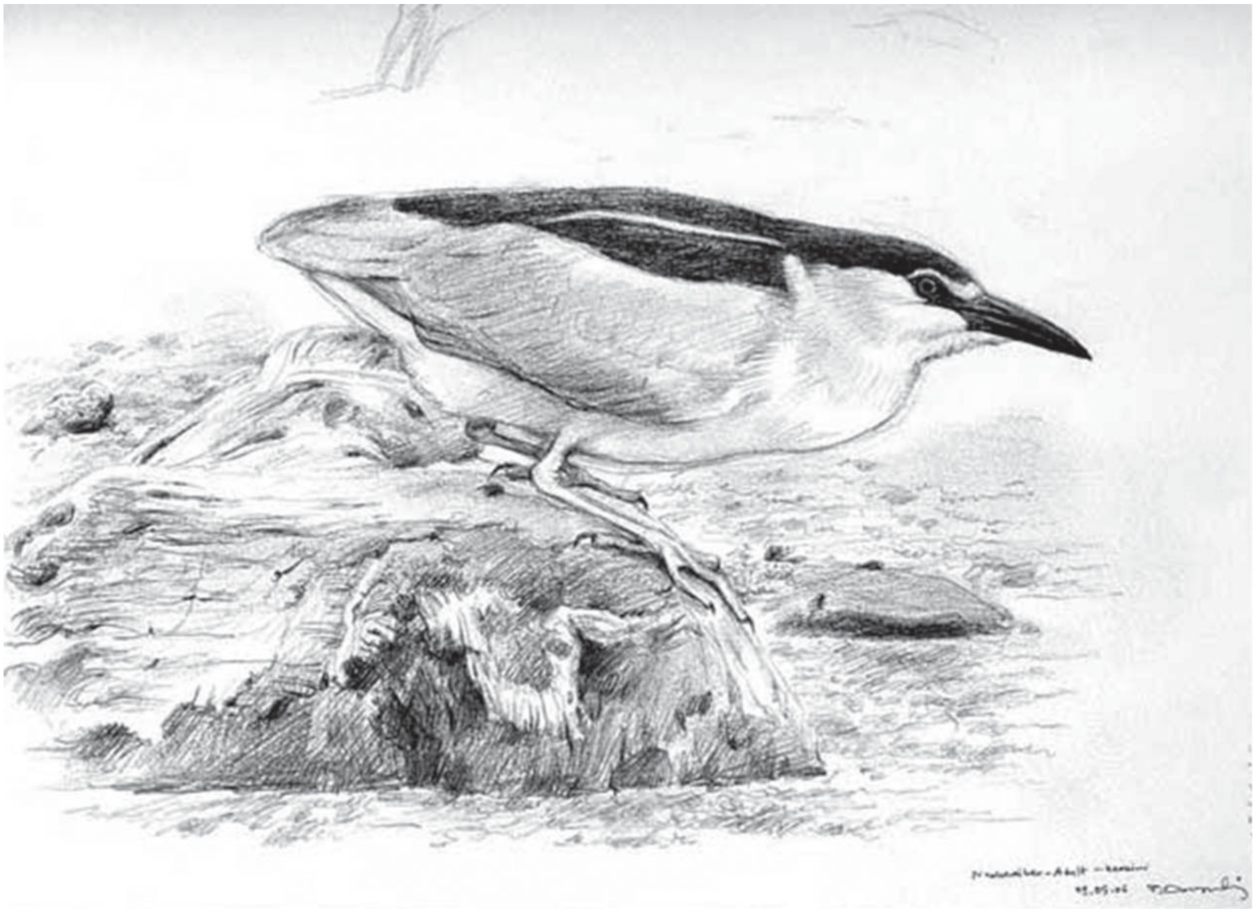


Centre lines of spheres.

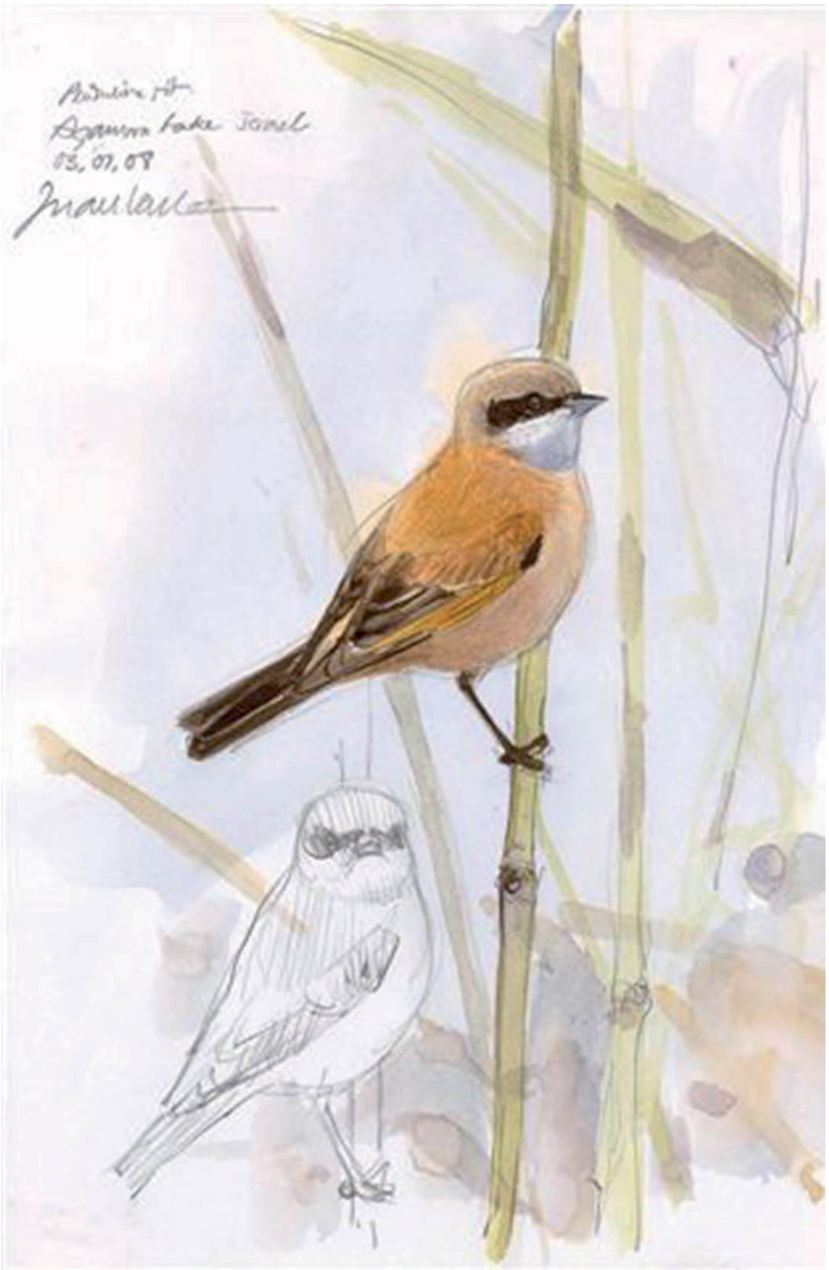
This drawing shows the centre line of birds as seen from a variety of angles. Sometimes in real life this is actually apparent on the bird's breast. Being able to imagine this line will help you to draw the rounded form of the bird.



Centre lines of birds: robin, arctic skua, mallard.



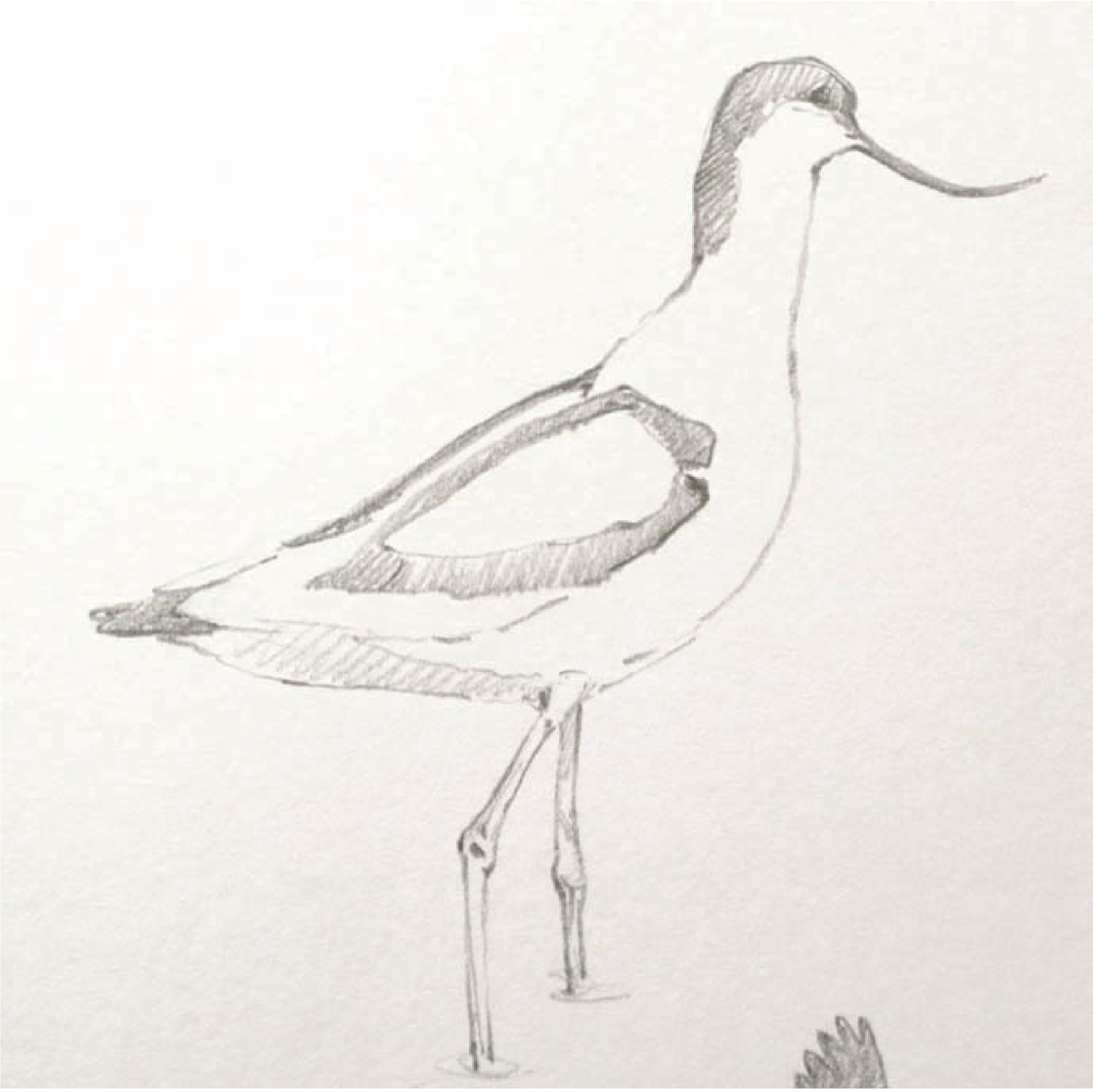
Paschalis Dougalis: night heron.

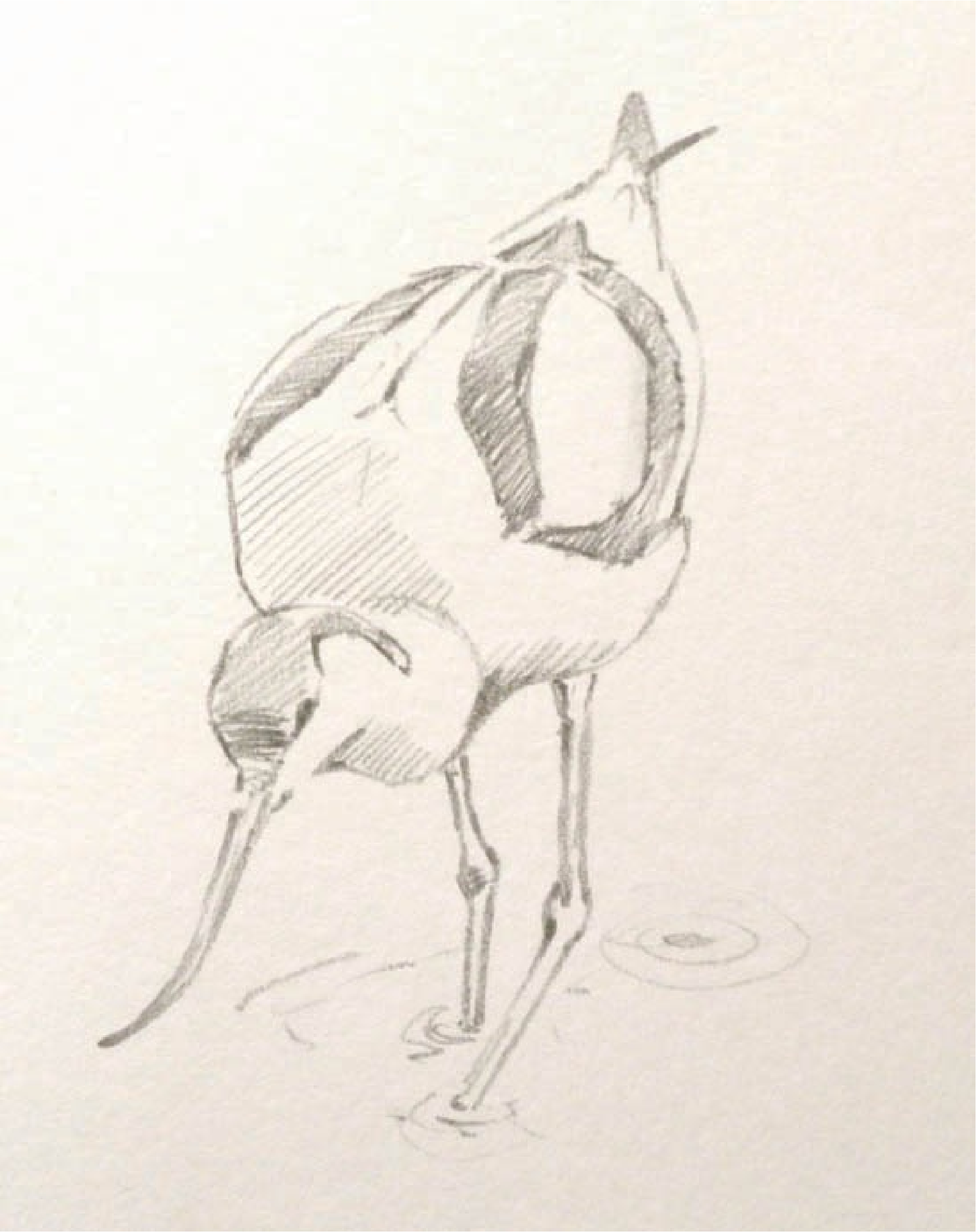


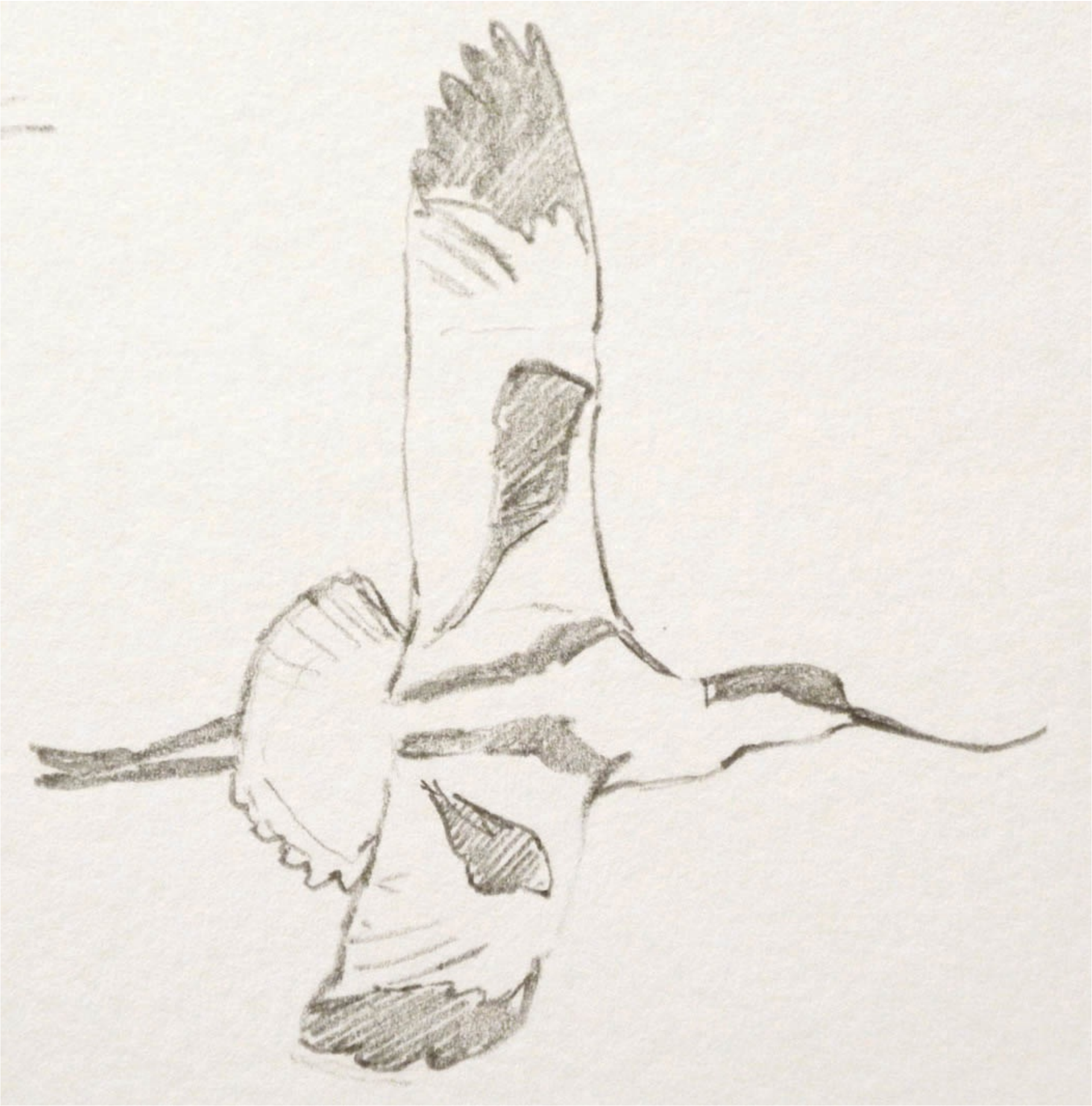
Juan Varela: penduline tit. Aspects of balance: in both drawings the 'knee' of the bird (which is actually the ankle) is visible; follow this angle and try to imagine where the true knee is and where then the legs would attach to the pelvis – remember the bird has two legs!

When drawing complex postures such as this three-quarter view of an avocet, (a three-quarter view is one where the subject is facing neither front-on, nor in side profile), look for the lines of most significance in helping convey the bird's form and shape. In the case of the avocet, the ‘braces’ of black (which are actually black scapular feathers) are excellent guides for the artist; get these right and the whole drawing stands a good chance of succeeding. In addition to the braces, there is a second pair of black bands formed by the greater wing coverts and primary feathers being black. When the wing is in the closed, folded position, these two black bands form a teardrop shape, enclosing an area of white (see below).

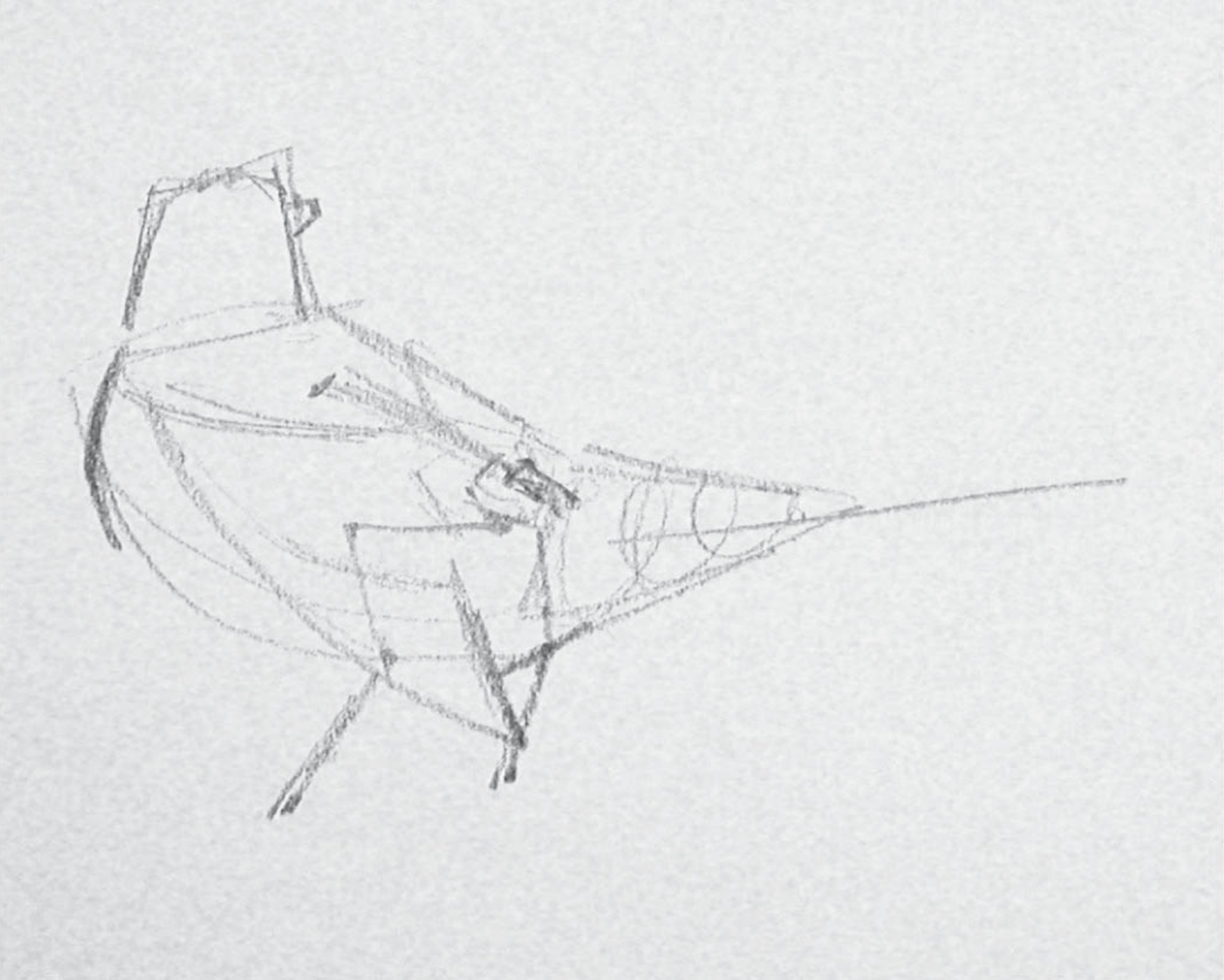
The final picture shows the feather groups with the wings extended.

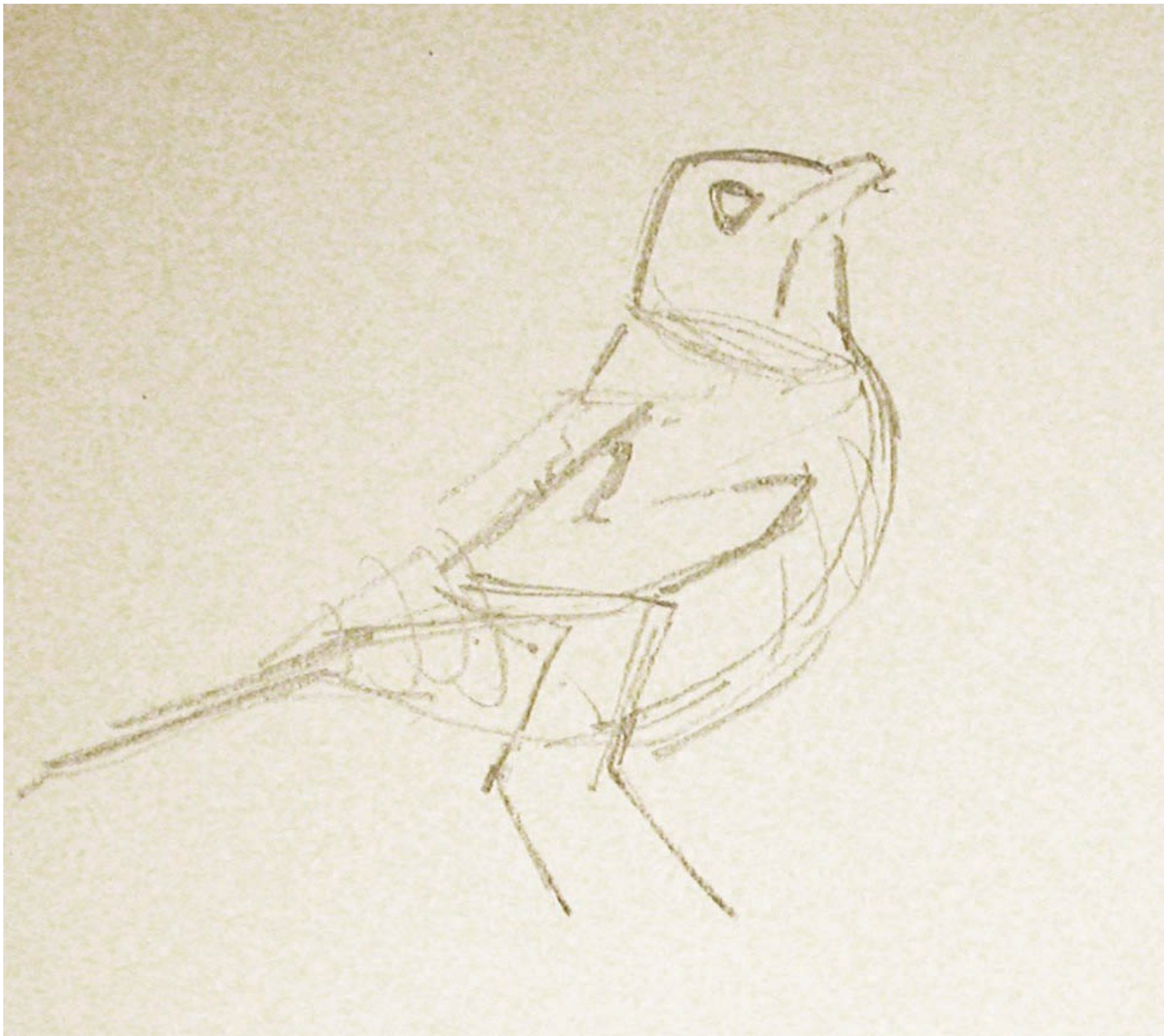






Tim Wootton: avocet.



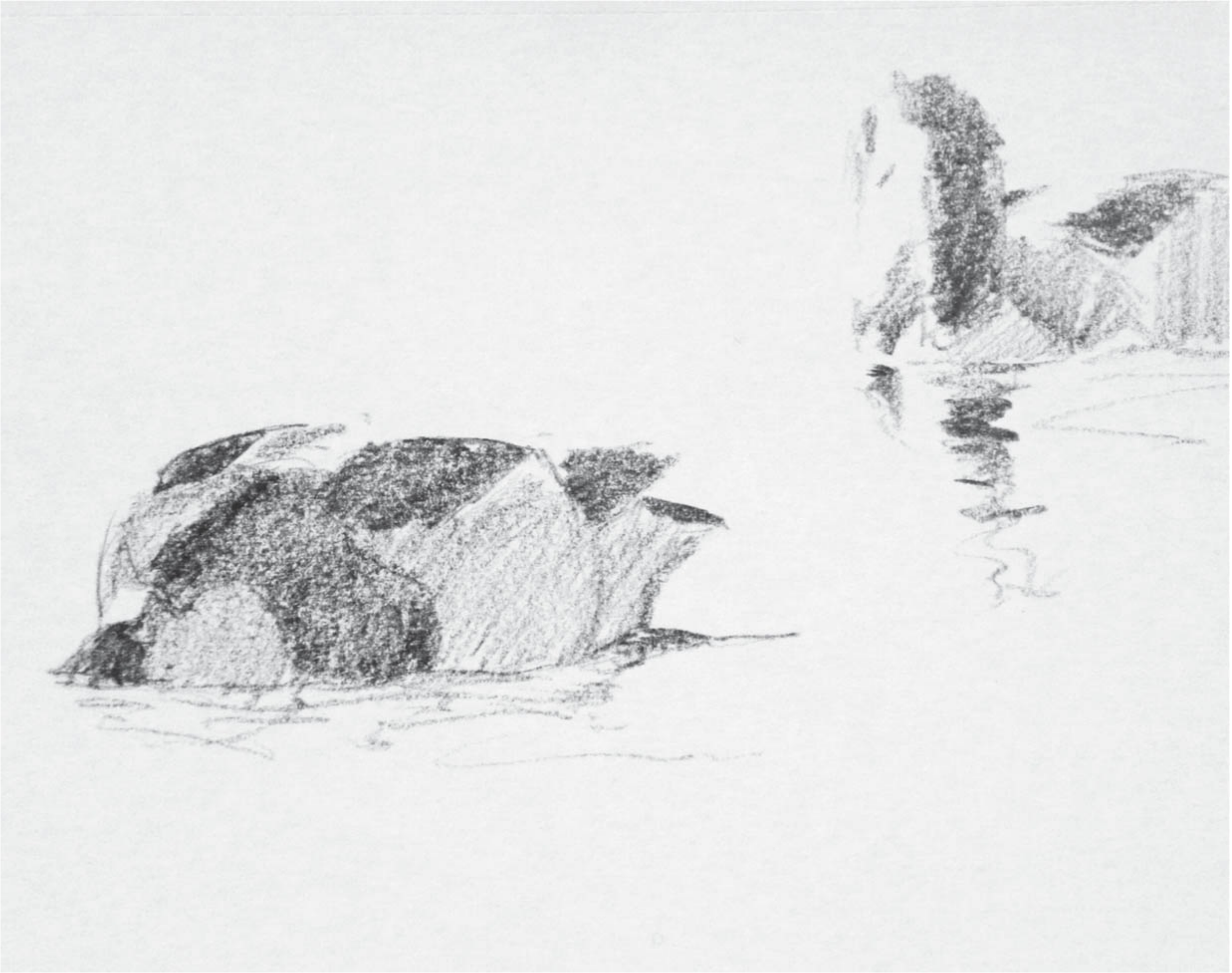


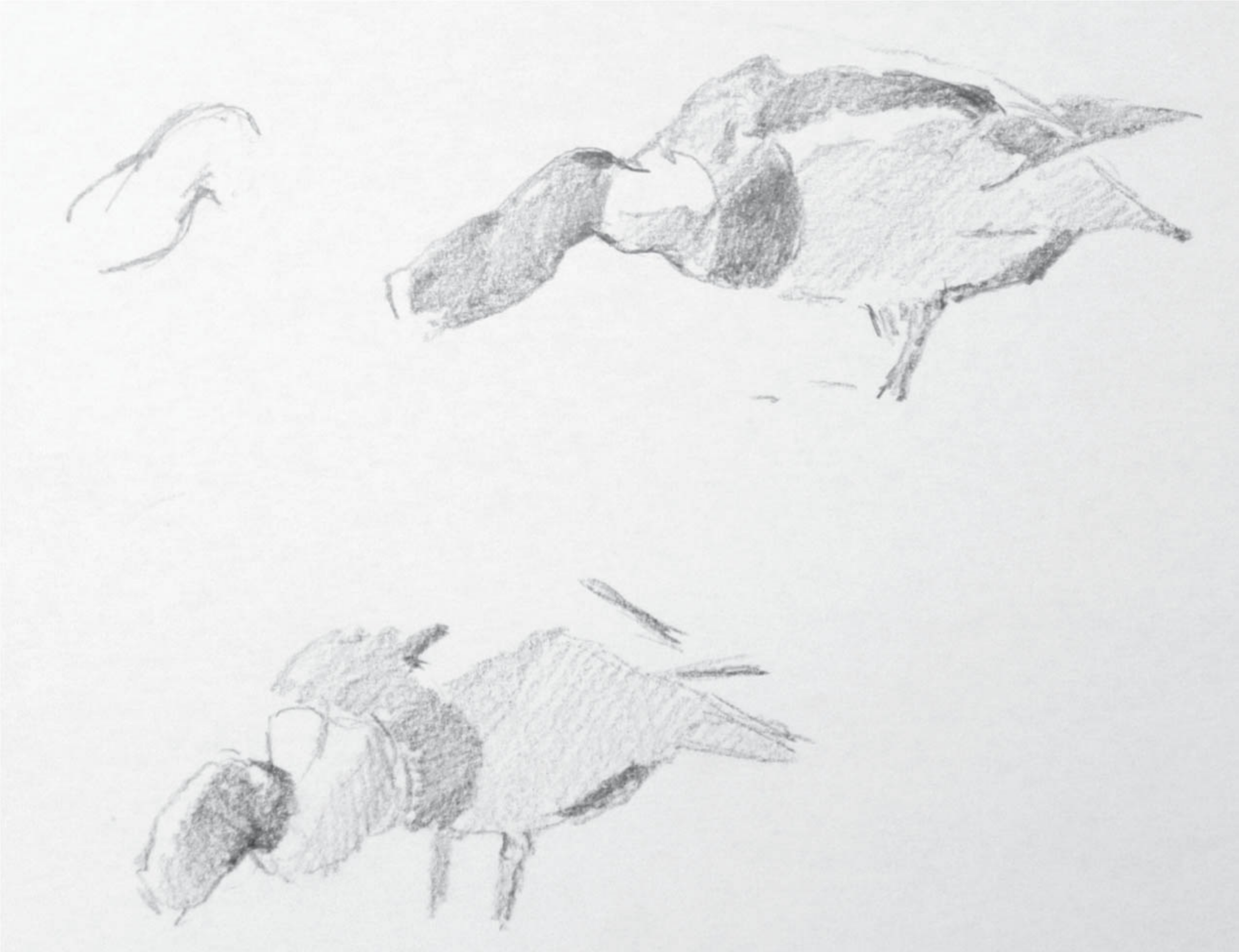
Tim Wootton: sketches of European blackbird, looking for lines of geometry.

The two-circle approach is relinquished in favour of the use of more diagnostic lines and angles (note the use of construction lines, which also help to describe the roundness of the form). The legs are described as imagined lines through the body and connect at the pelvis. The head is drawn as a box, the body is based on an oval and the conical base of the tail is derived from a triangular shape.

If line is the fundamental method of drawing, then tone (shade), besides being a close associate, is also an essential process in its own right. Using tone only can be an exciting and descriptive way of drawing;

the outline of the bird is suggested in the periphery of the tonal marks – a technique that has much in common with painting. This style is sometimes referred to as 'drawing from inside the form' and dispenses with an outline containing the structure. It is an effective way of drawing light – albeit in relief.

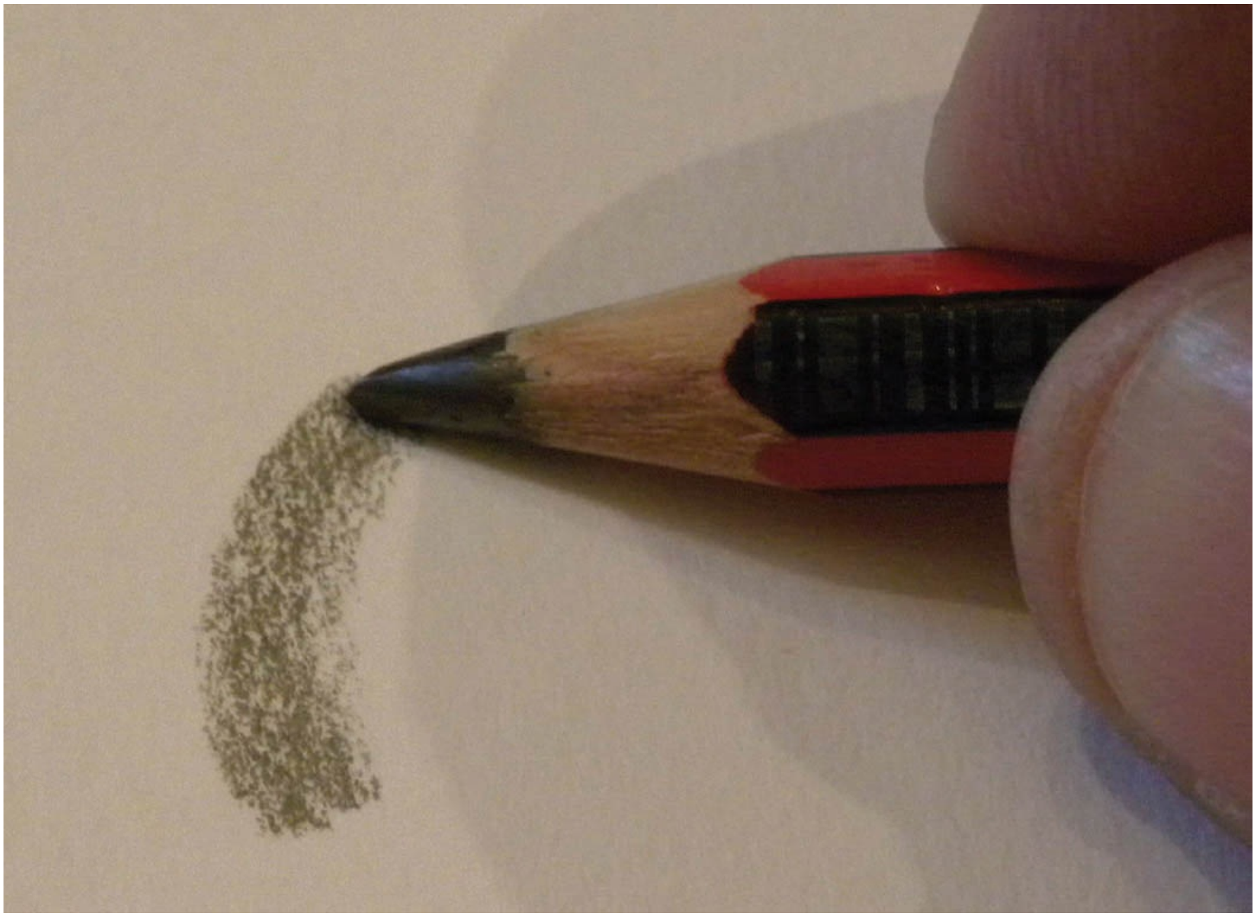


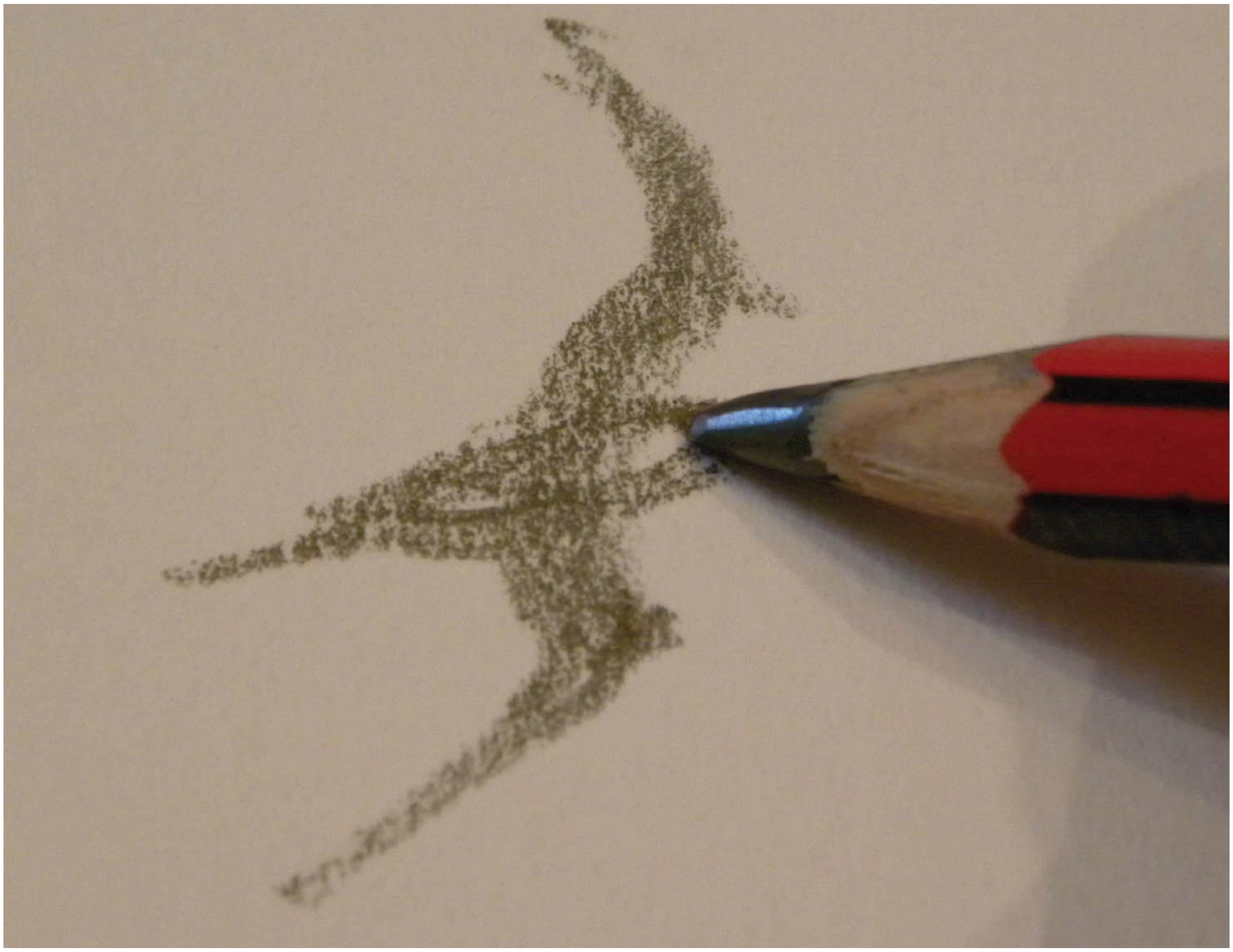


Tim Wootton: shelduck studies, using mainly tone to represent form and light.

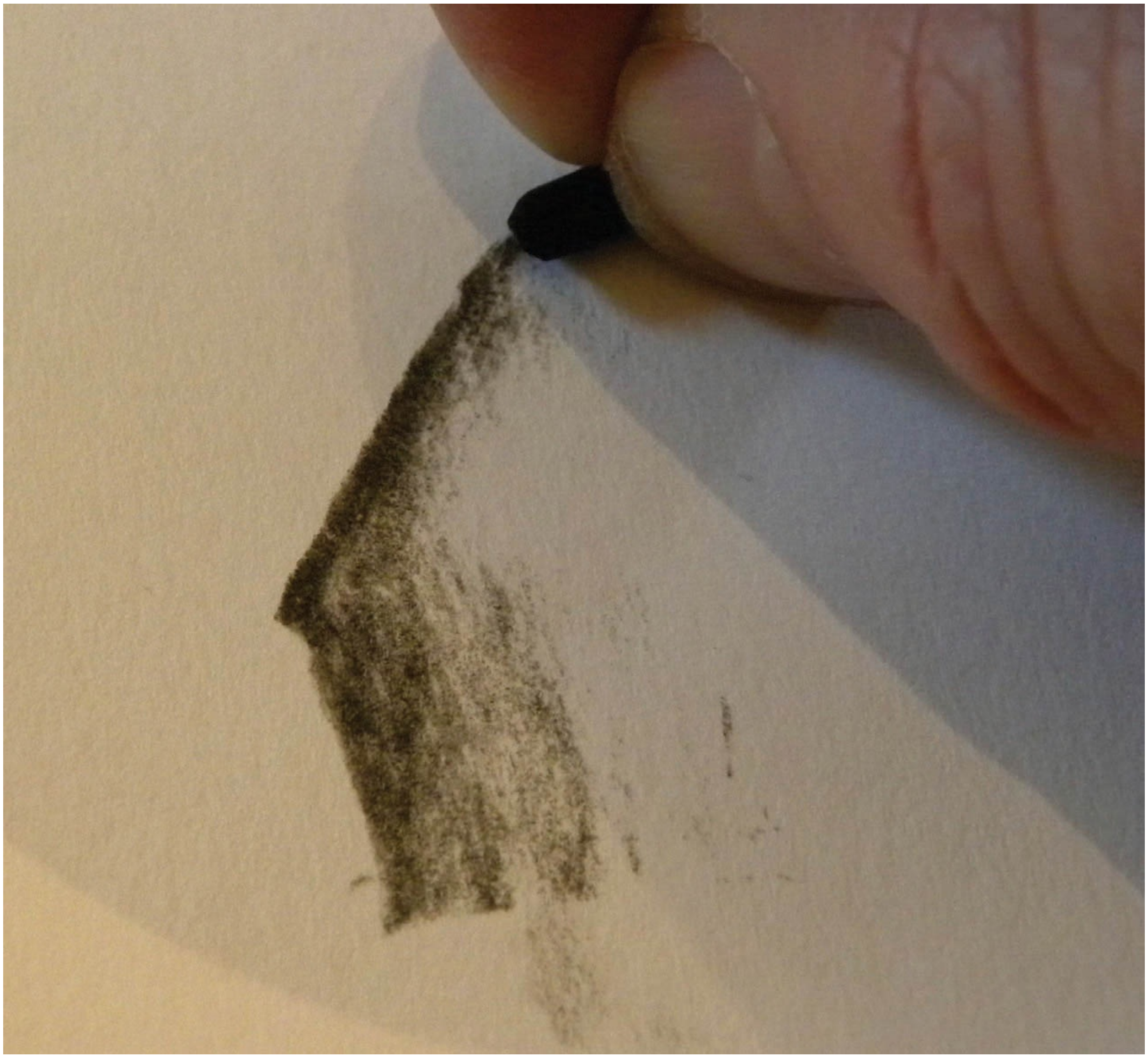
Sketching using tone could be termed as drawing from the inside of the form. When we work in this way we are trying to mould the structure of the bird using light and shade.

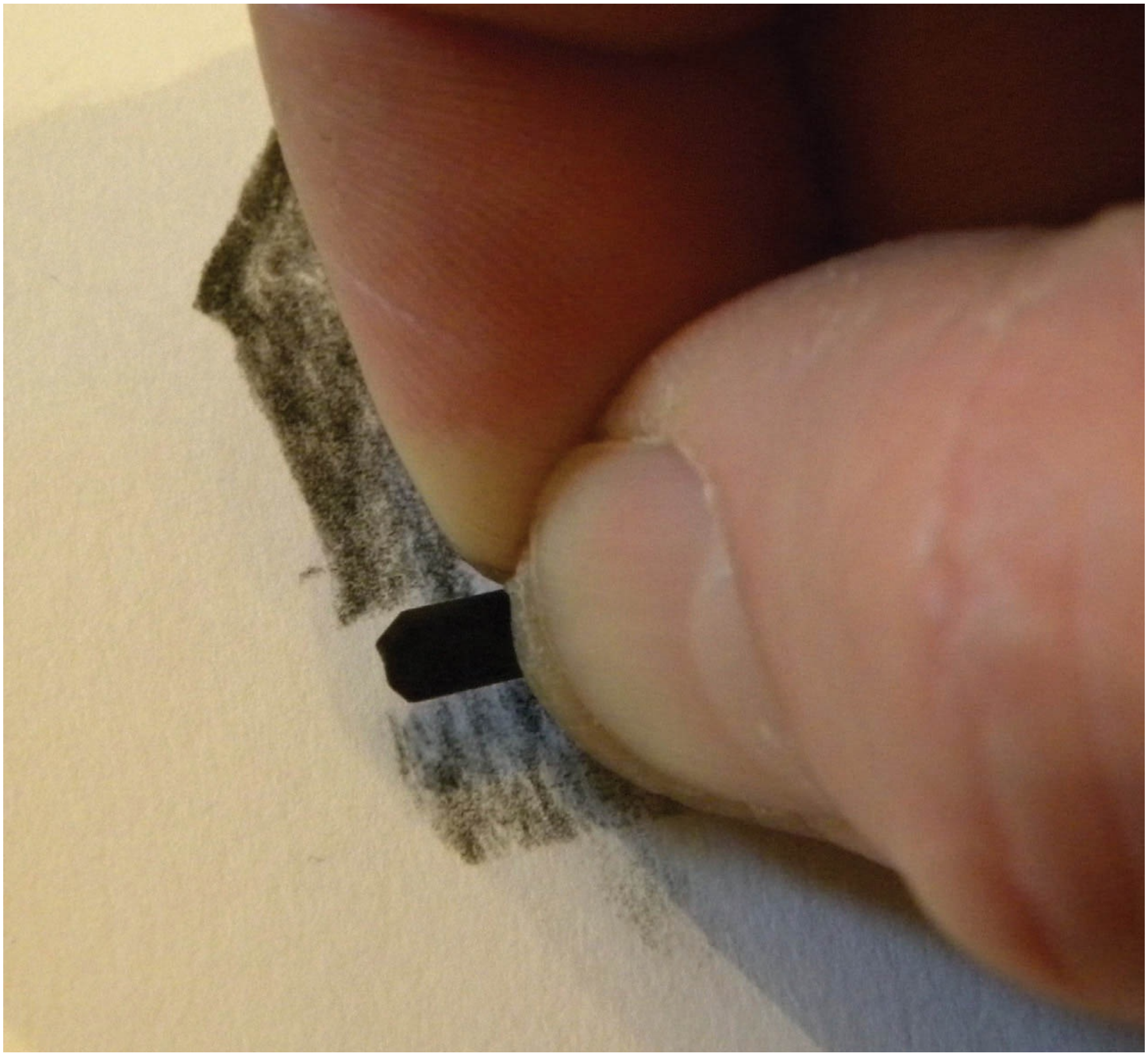
It may be useful to learn a few shorthand methods of making bird shapes, as practising them will bring more confidence with the media and the subject. The following examples use the sides as well as the point of the pencil and a couple of techniques are shown using charcoal (sides and ends).



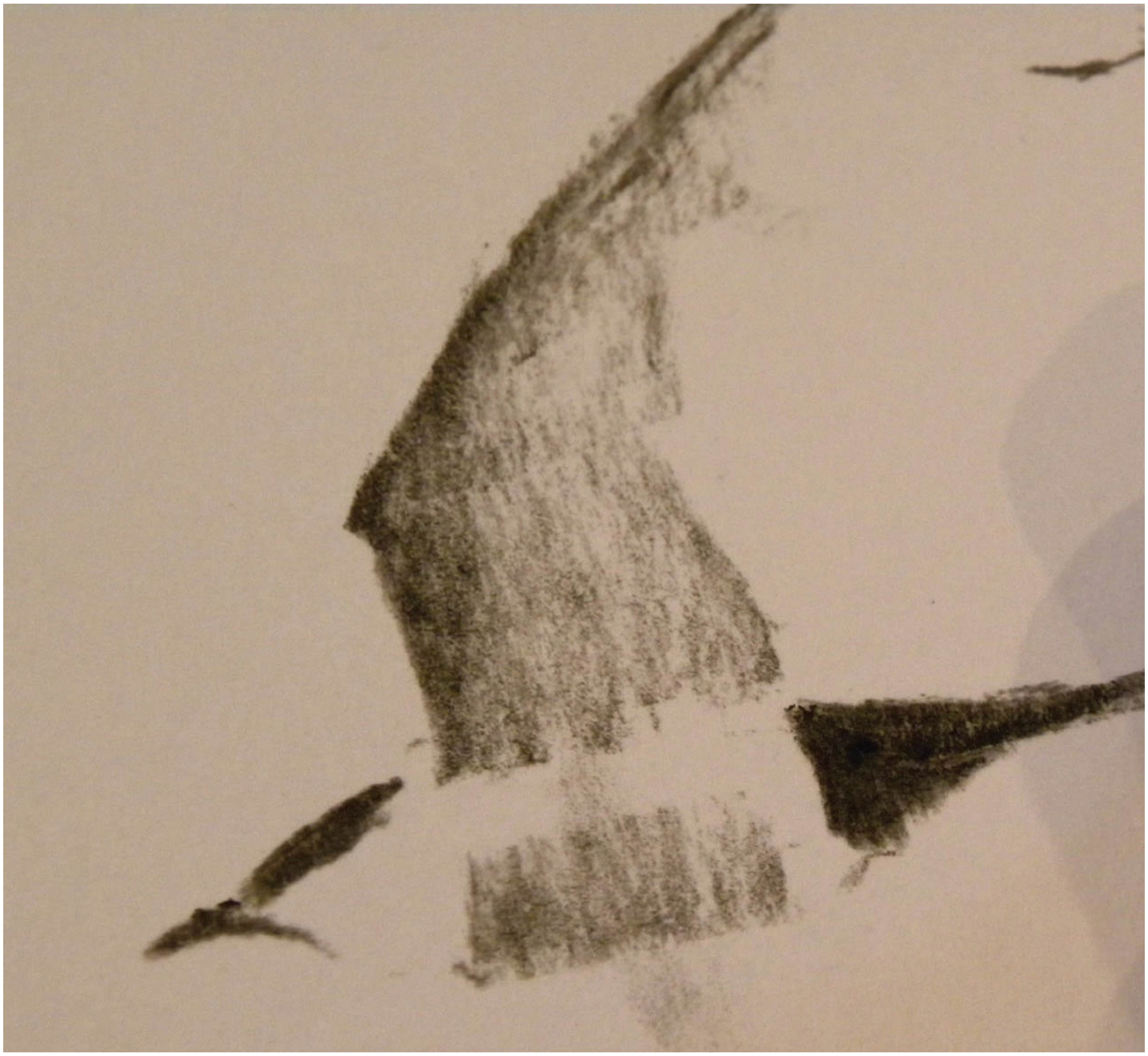


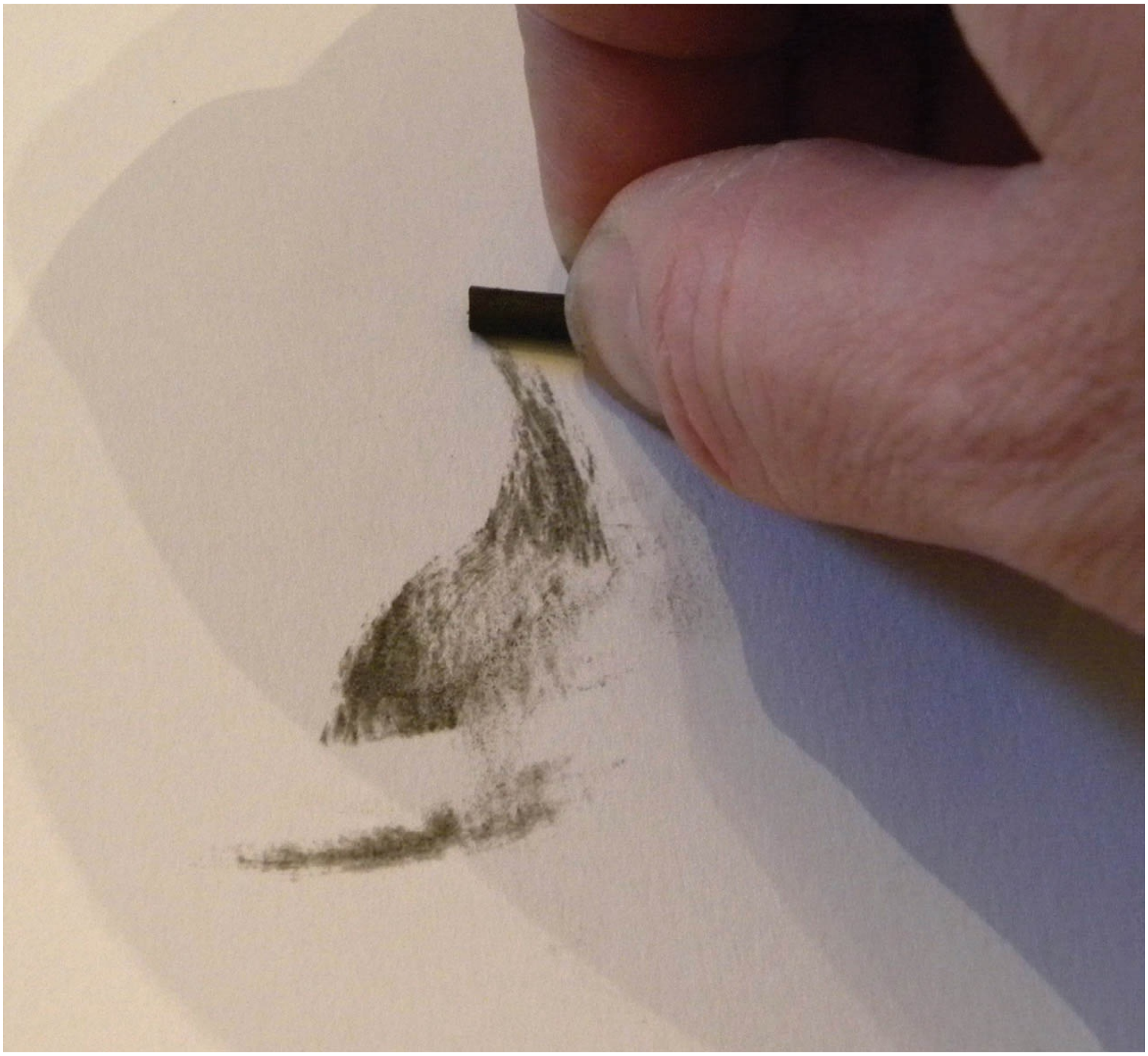
Arctic skua in six strokes. Using the broad side of the lead make an arc, then, still using the pencil sides, bring the wings back into a point and finally a stretched oval with a rear extension and a dark smudge for a cap.

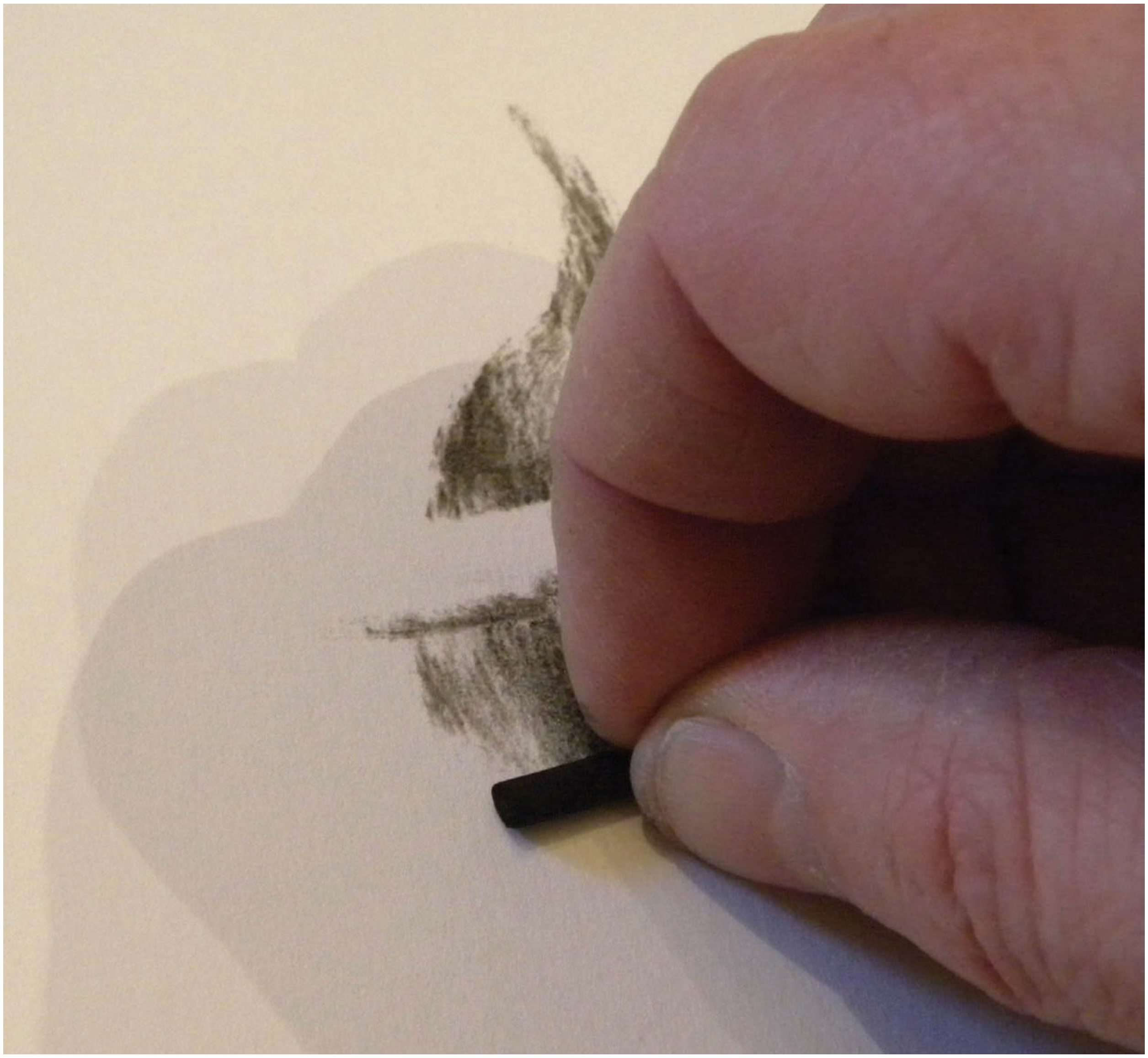




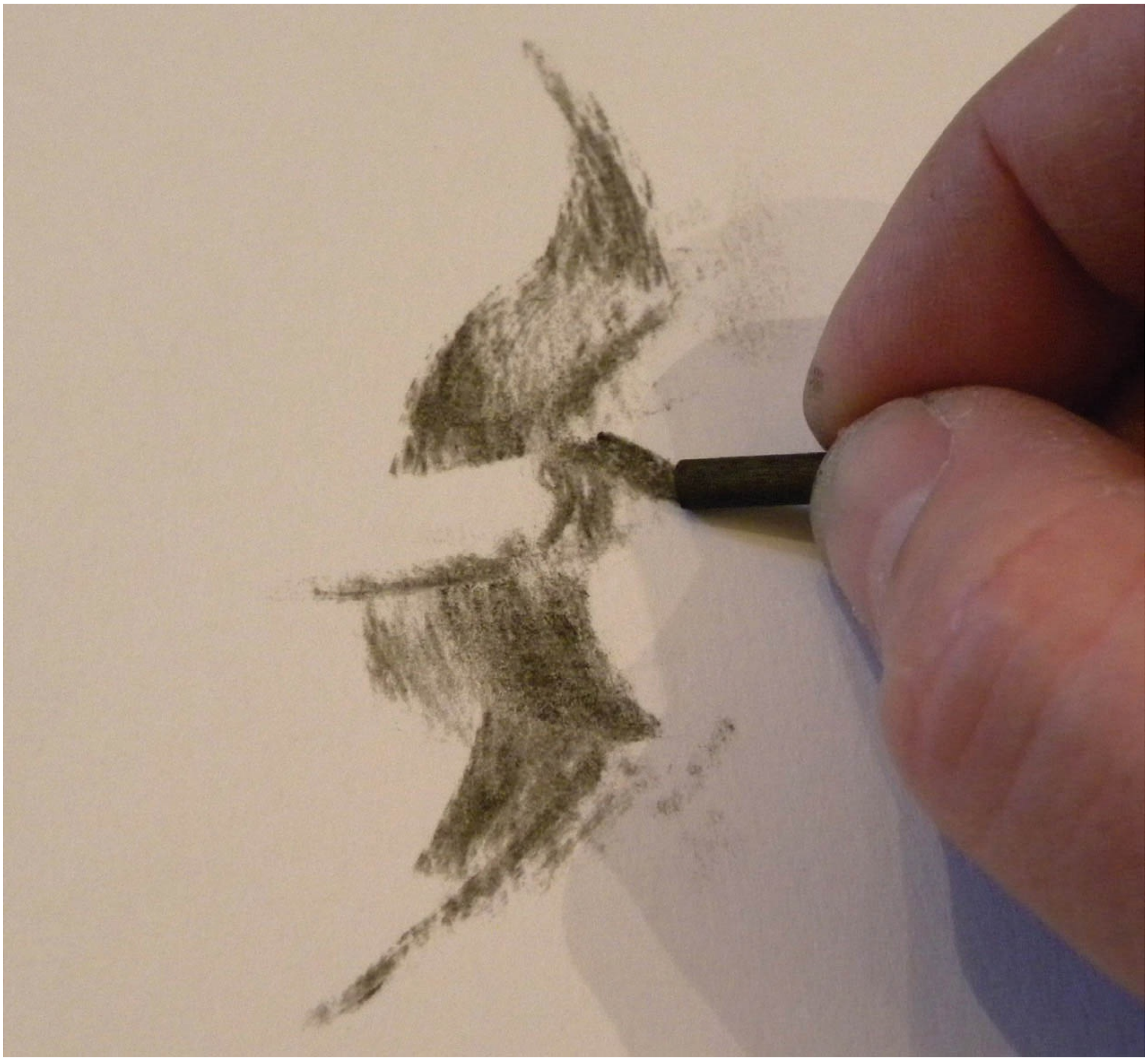
Arctic skua in charcoal. Using the side of a small piece of charcoal (about 1cm long) make an upward and gently concave sweep; stop, but keep the charcoal on the paper, then bring the mark back and to a point. Bring the stick to where you imagine the bird's belly to be and make an upward mark, easing the pressure as you go. Use the end to sketch a dark cap and fine bill, bringing the line back and under the throat slightly. Finally a dark triangle and extended line are drawn for the tail. The simple shapes and varied tones are unconnected by outline, yet the eye assembles the pieces into a coherent and understood figure.

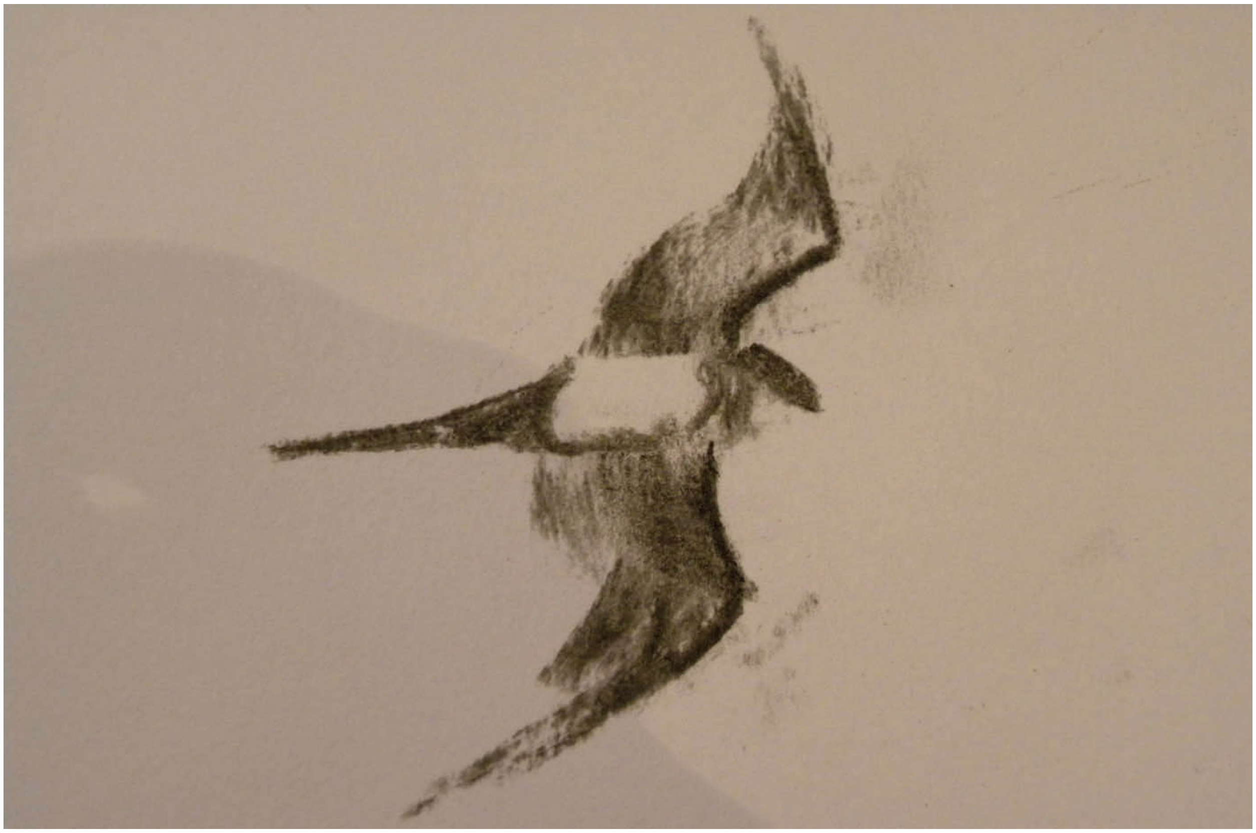






Using the flat side of a short piece of charcoal, make a curve towards yourself and then reverse the action making the pointed wing tip. Drawing the bottom wing mirrors the action. Use the stick-end for a breastband and cap, and to draw the lower abdomen and tail. You can use exactly the same strokes to draw the bird as though seen from above but simply continue the dark across its back.



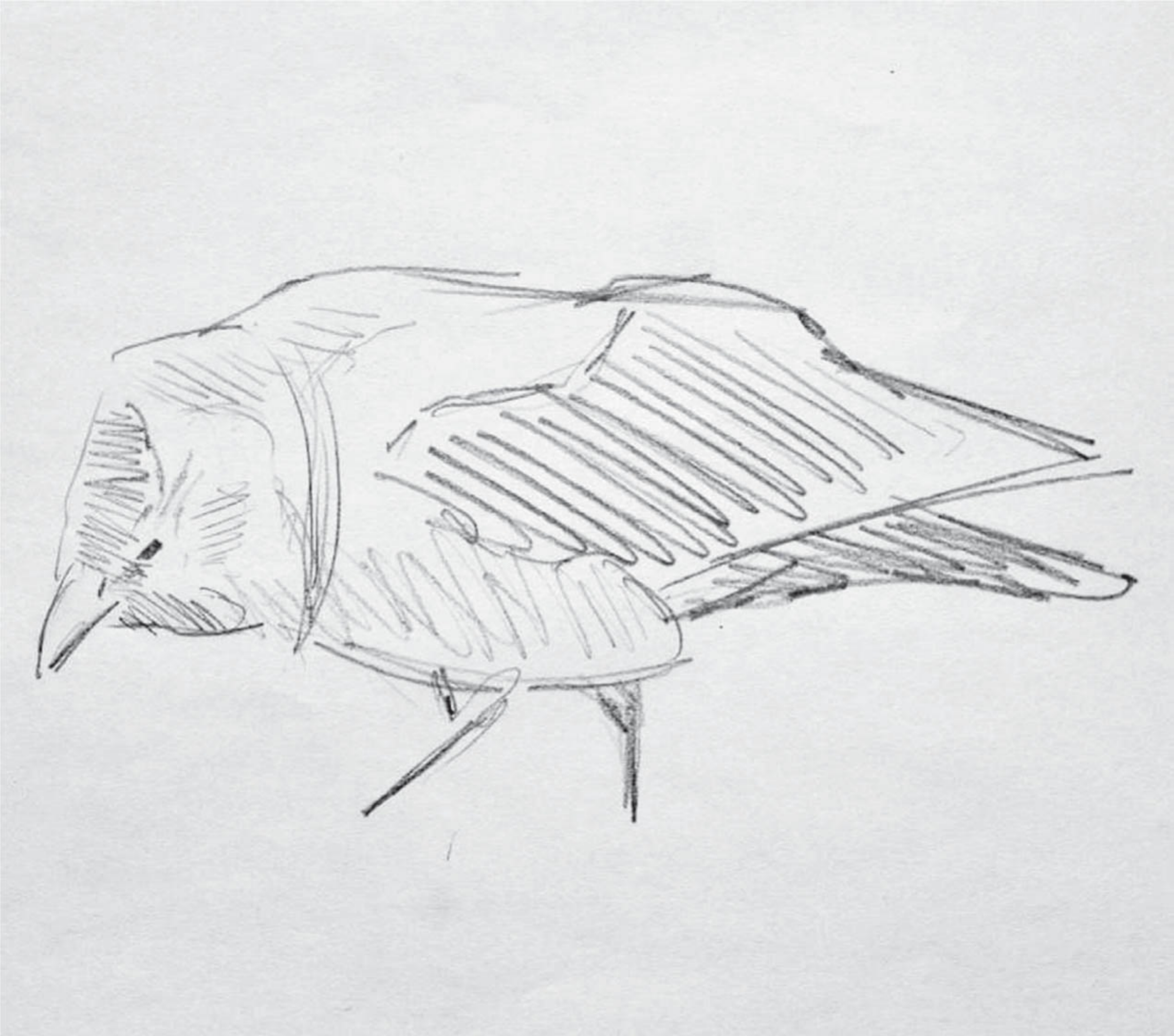


Arctic skua.

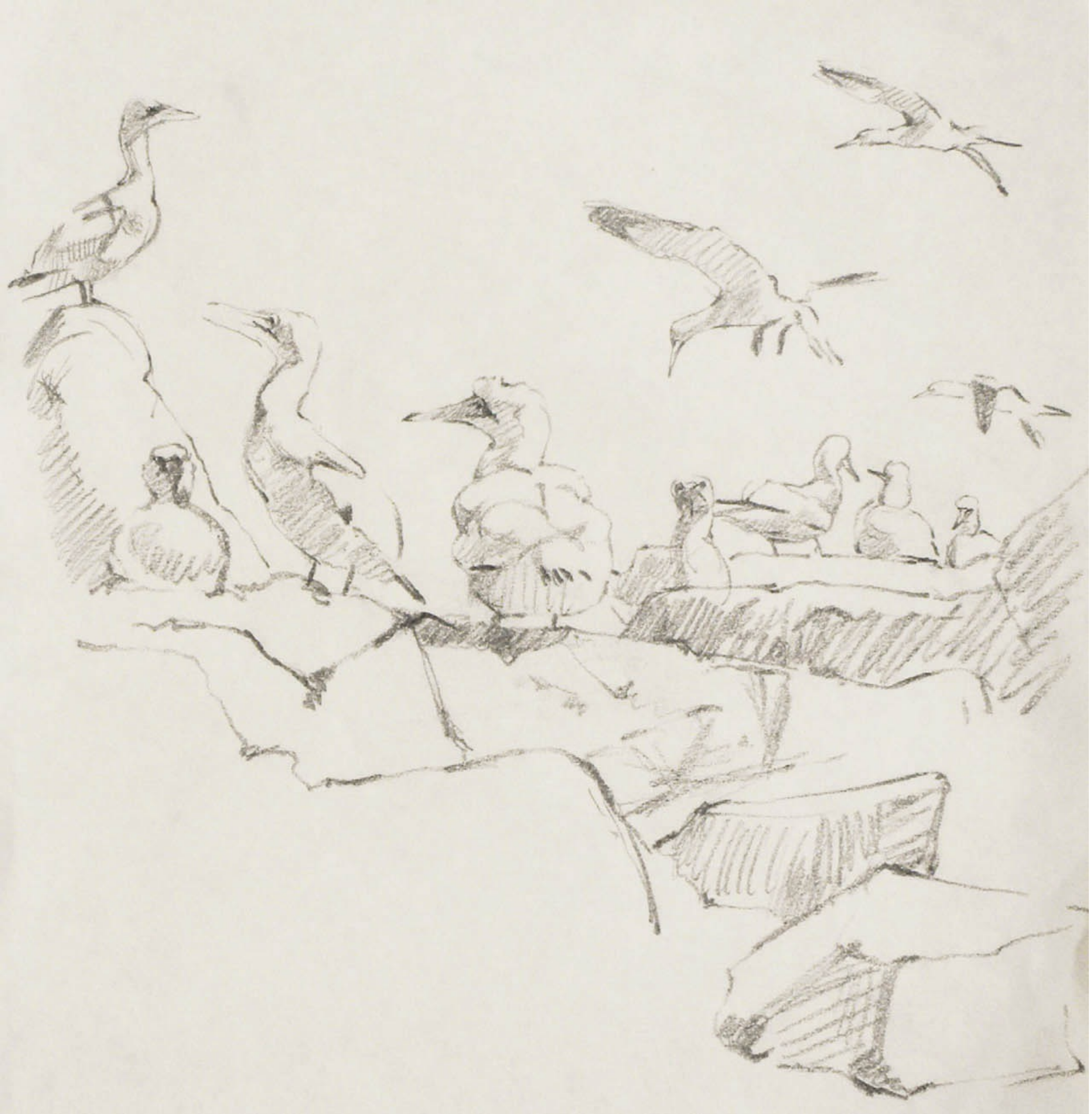
MATERIALS FOR SKETCHING

Pencil

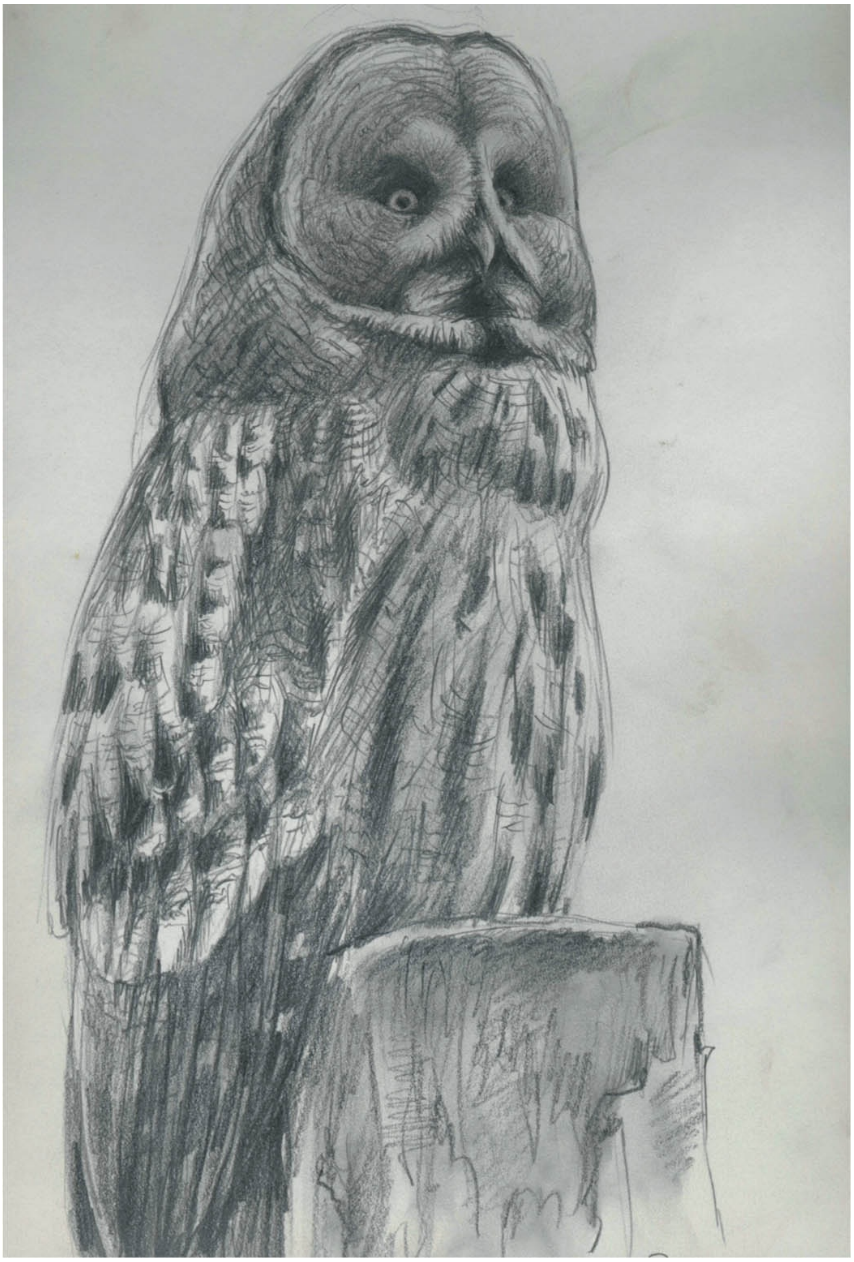
Pencil is the primary draughting tool and is available in varying degrees of hardness/softness. (H is hard, B is black, or soft, and the numbers grade the pencil correspondingly.) Many artists use propelling (automatic) pencils; these remove the need to sharpen as the lead is continuous, but the lines can be a tad uniform. I draw using a 6B (soft) pencil and I often alternate between line and tone in the same drawing, using the pencil edge to fill in areas of tone (this also has the effect of sharpening the pencil). Other handy monochrome media are available to the artist such as Conté pencils and pastels and charcoal pencils and sticks.



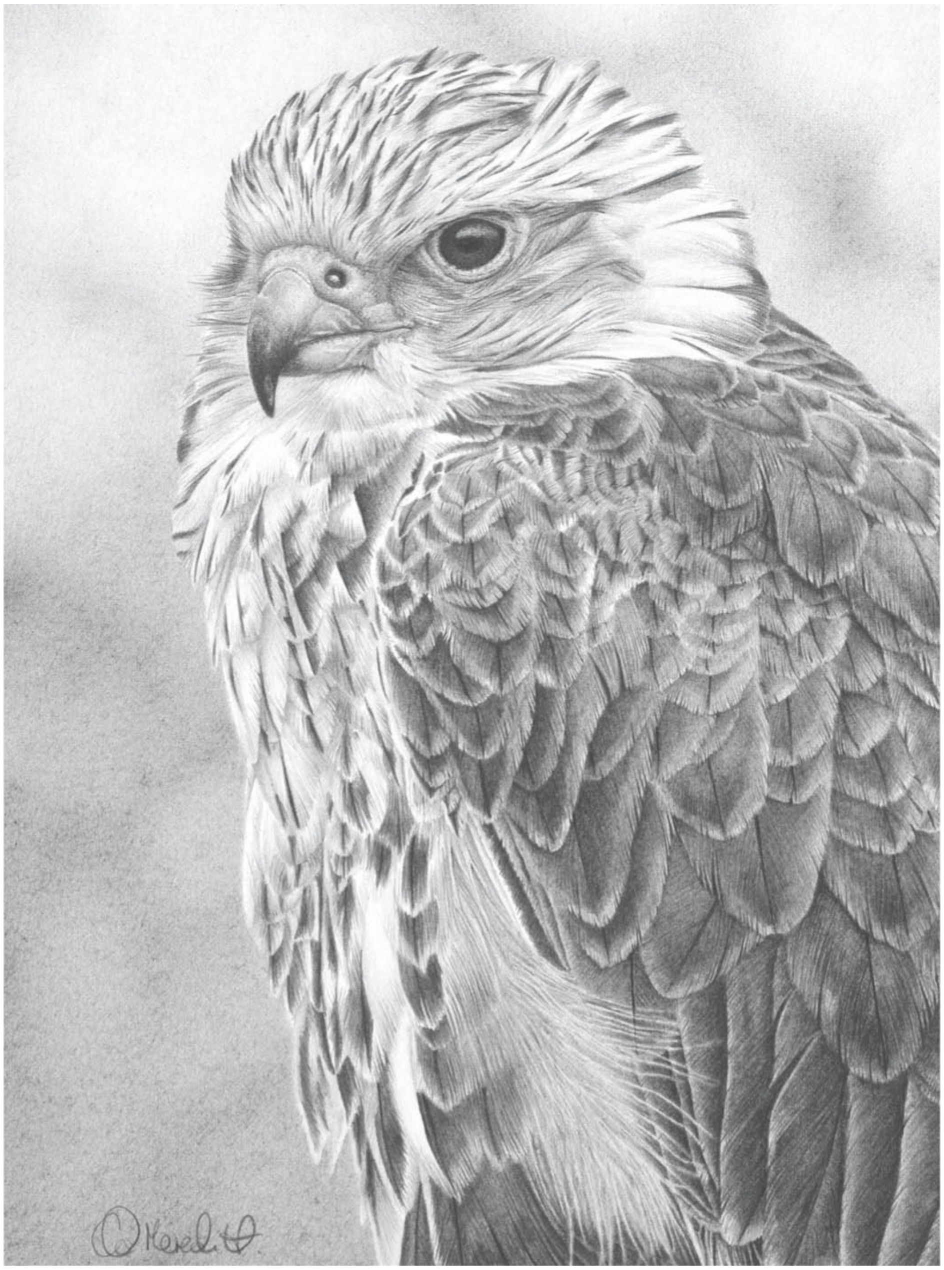
Alan Dalton: jackdaw study. Soft pencil and strong directional marks.



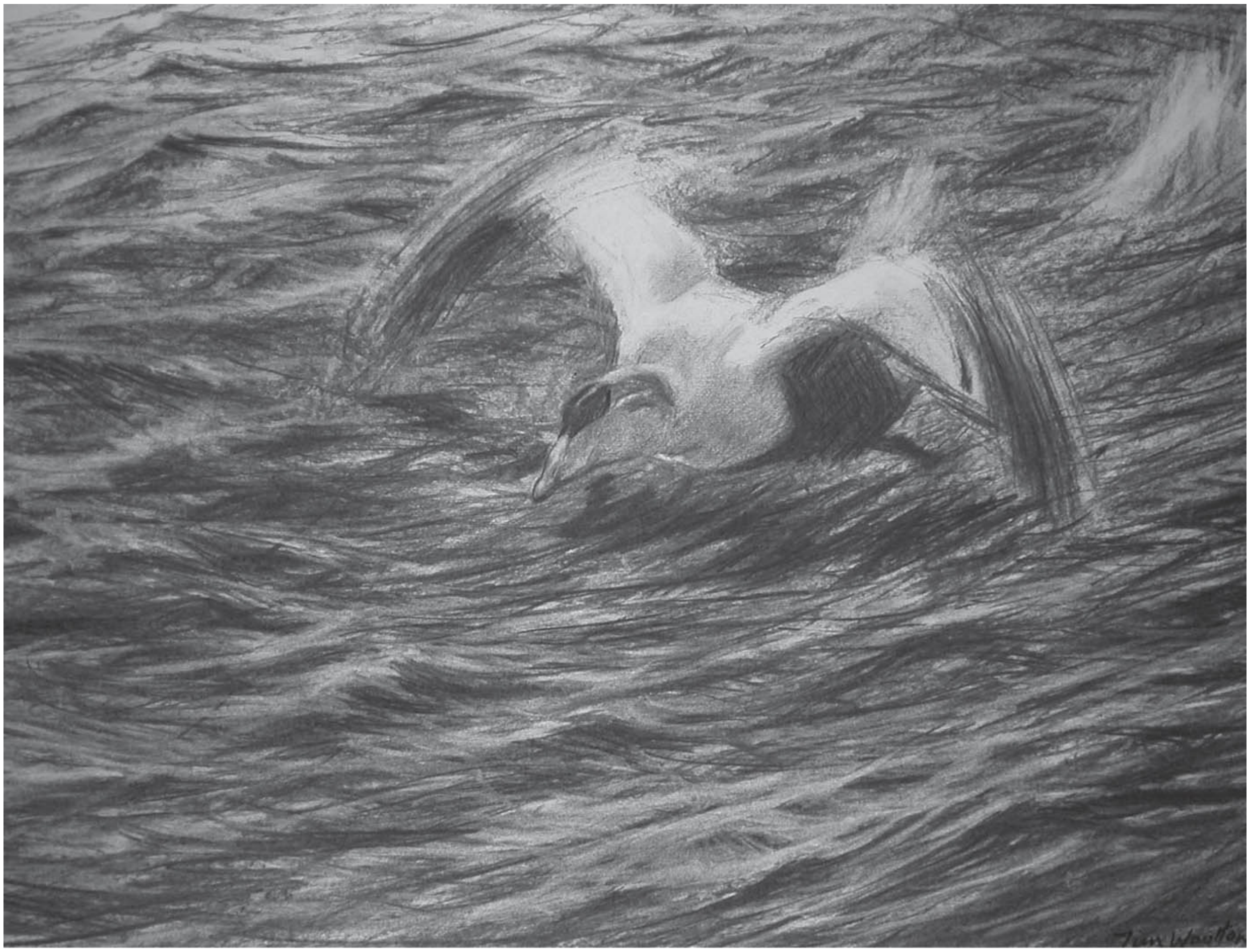
John Busby: *Gannets on the Bass Rock*. Conté drawing *in situ*. The process of mark-making is elemental in the artist's work and it is instructive to follow the way he makes lines come alive. At intervals he pauses to reassess the scene before him and restarts the drawing making slightly darker statements as the pencil pauses on the paper. Important changes in direction of form are accentuated giving the drawing a strong sense of depth.



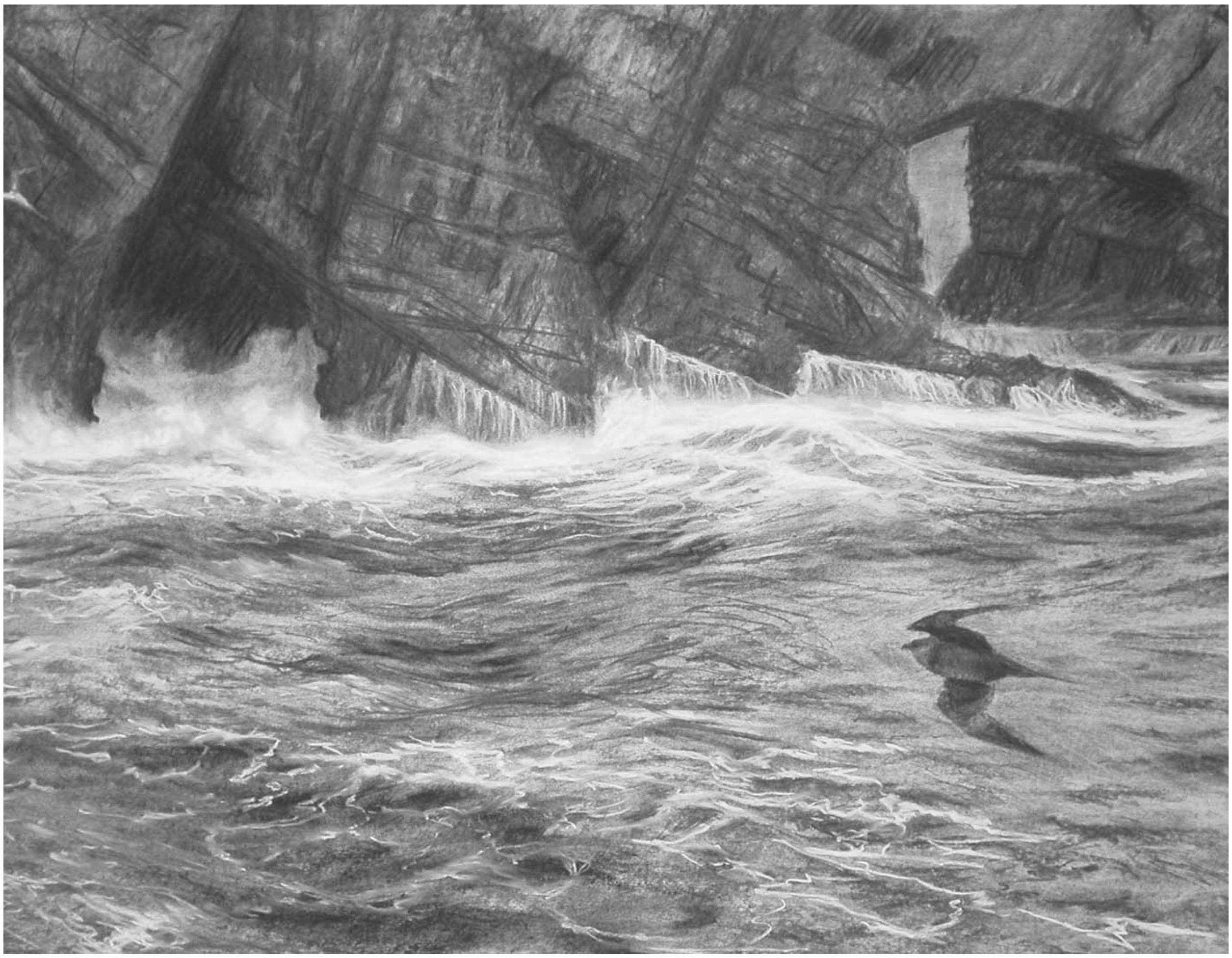
Paschalis Dougalis: *Great Grey Owl*. Graphite pencil drawing made from a captive bird. The artist investigates form and texture using all the variety the medium has to offer: line and tone, hatching and rubbing with fingers to make softer areas of tone. The drawing has a very wide range of values from blacks to areas of virgin paper as highlights.



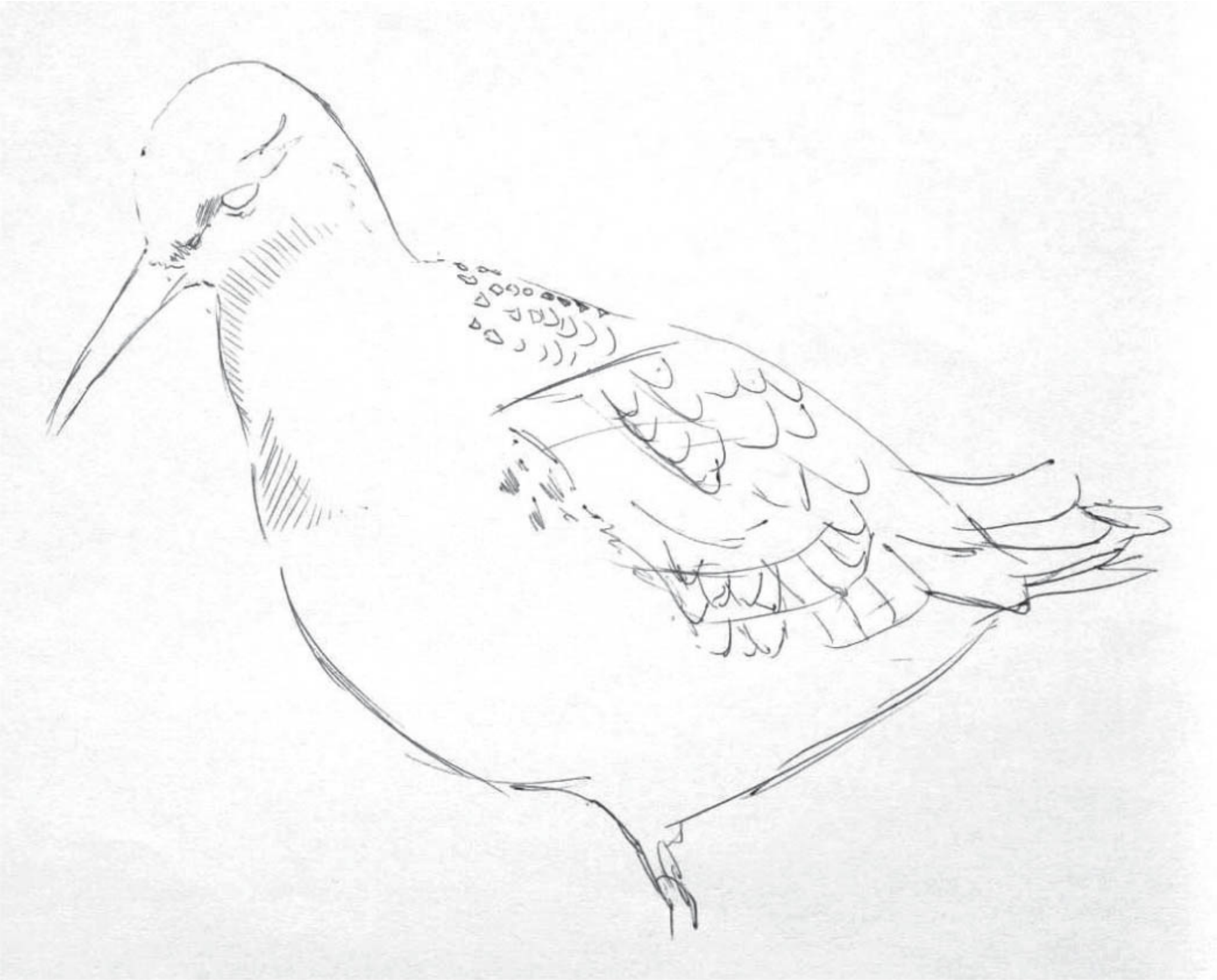
Clive Meredith: *Saker Falcon*. Intensely detailed drawing derived from various photographs the artist made from a captive bird. Clive uses an ingenious method for the very fine white feathers. He scores into the paper with a fine, blunt tool which precisely delineates where he wants the highlights to remain. When he then uses pencil over this scored area, the grooves in the paper remain pristine and unmarked – a technique akin to brass-rubbing.

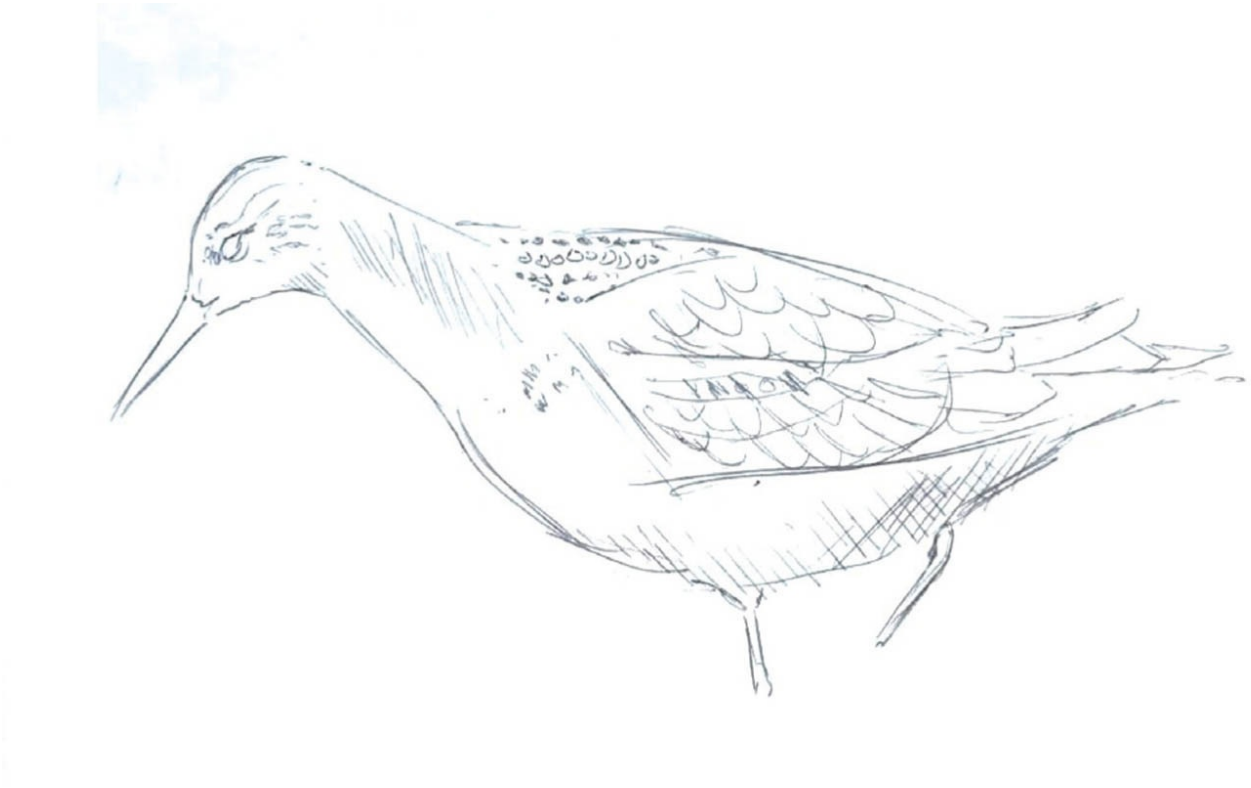


Tim Wootton: eider. Studio study from rough drawings made in the field – layers of tone are built up over the water areas, and the drawing of the eider is allowed to blend into the water, especially where the wings are moving fastest. Highlights on the bird and the splashes behind it are untouched paper showing through. The drawing is made on heavyweight household lining wallpaper (32” x 22”).



Tim Wootton: *Intermediate Phase Arctic Skua, Fair Isle*. A studio charcoal drawing using a selection of reference photographs of the seascape and drawings of arctic skuas made in the field. There is the additional use of white soft pastel along the backwash of the swell and in the turbulent water in the fore. Compositionally there are several points of interest, the skua being the foremost, then, following the direction of the bird's flight, the swell of water takes the eye up and across. Afterwards the fissures in the rock lead towards the graphically represented arctic terns (the skua's quarry); the natural exploration of the scene then follows the backwash from the rocks, into and past the dark cave and towards the intriguing hole – a sea-arch. The invitation is to suppose what may be beyond.

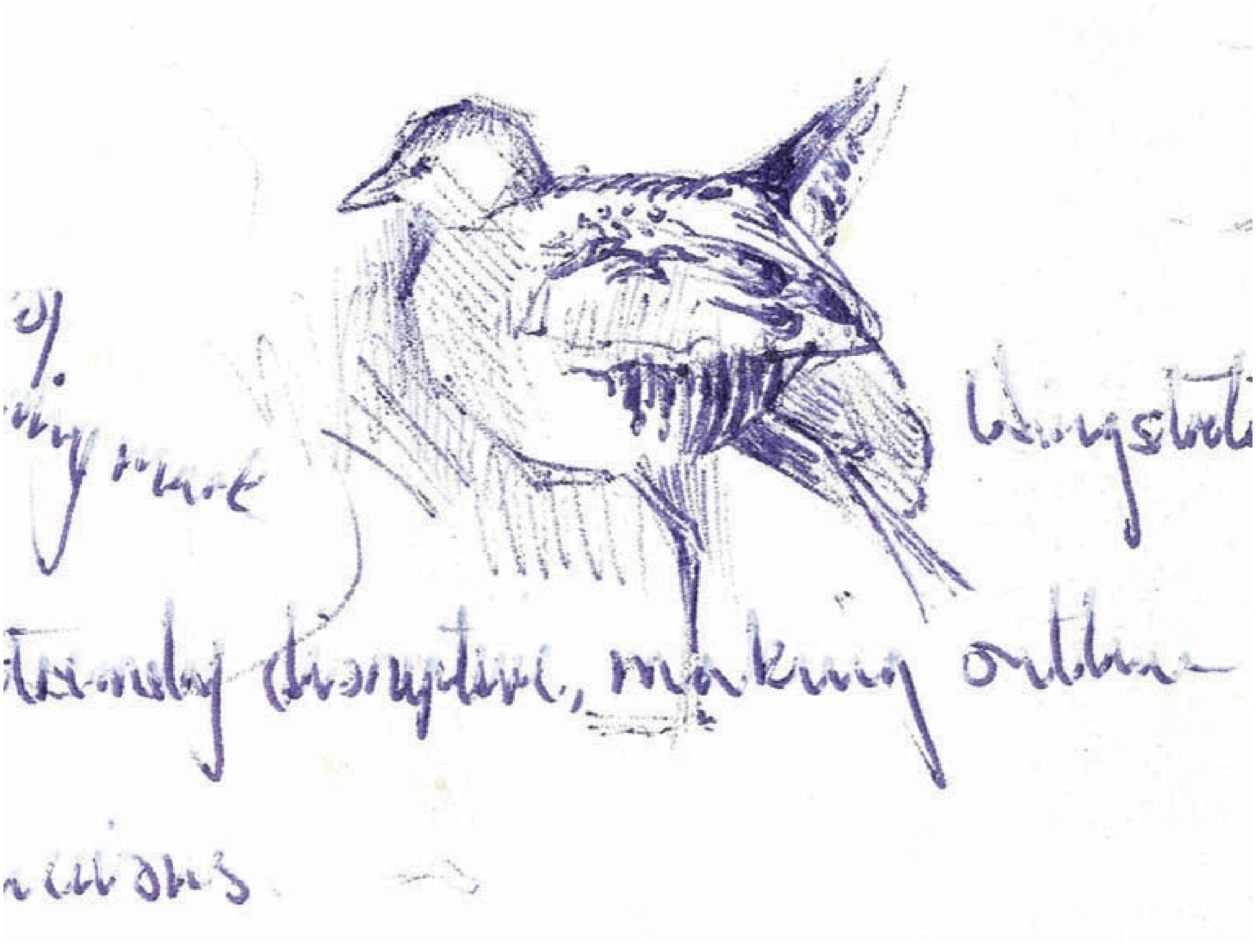




Alan Dalton: drawings of ruff (biro). The biro pen is a simple and handy tool that lends itself to making strong images. See how the major shapes of the feather masses are described and outlined, giving solidity to the drawing.

Ink

Ink is an excellent discipline to learn: it is immediate and cannot be corrected – once a line is made, it stays. However, this also gives the artist much freedom that pencil sometimes doesn't – all temptation to rub out is taken away and you can concentrate on making the drawing.


ing mark
Wingstret
tremely disruptive, making outline
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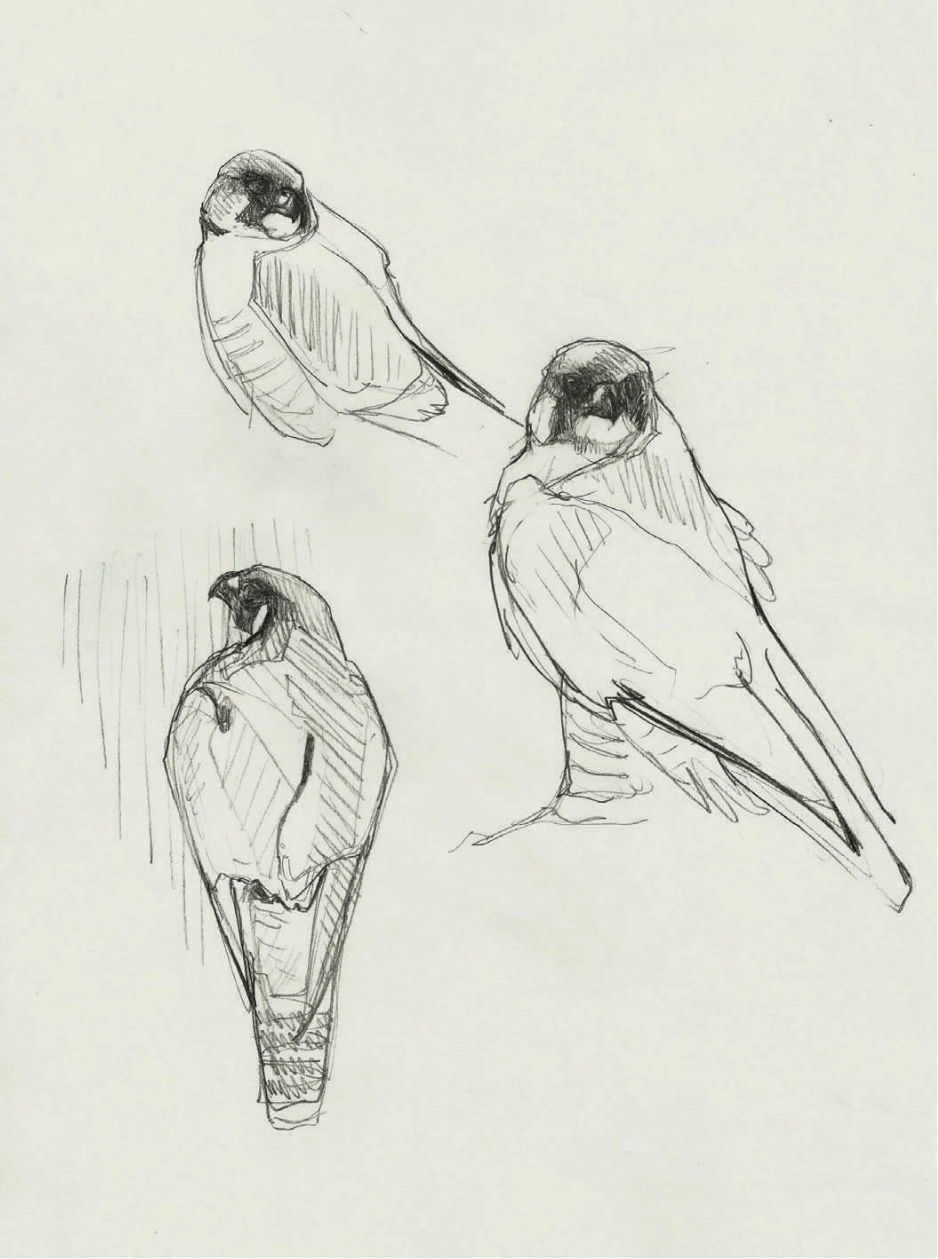
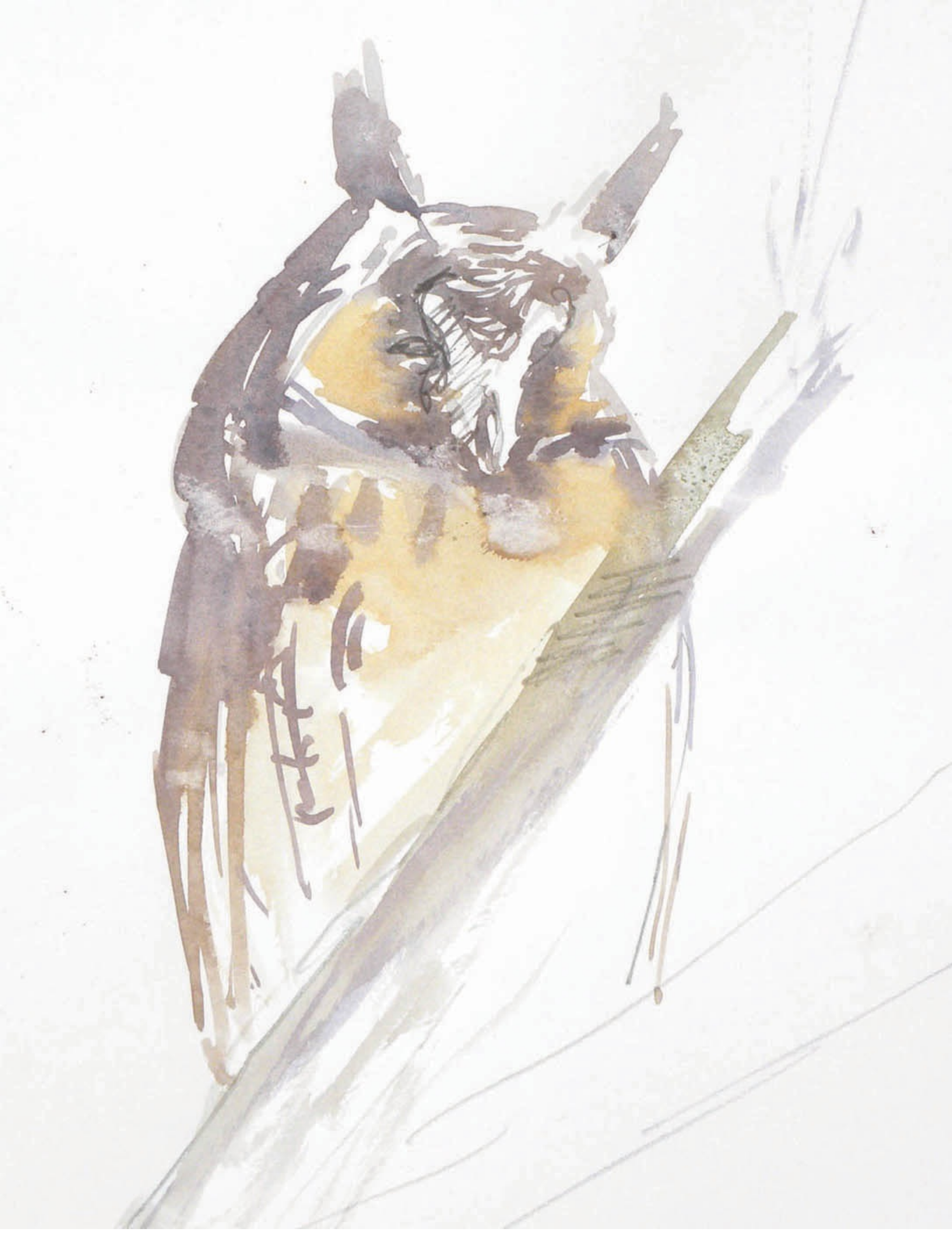
Ed Keeble: spotted crake wing-stretching. A moment captured immediately in this tiny biro drawing.



Ed Keeble: peregrine. The artist gets straight onto the important lines; form and structure are suggested by quick marks describing the planes contained with very definite and accurate profiles.

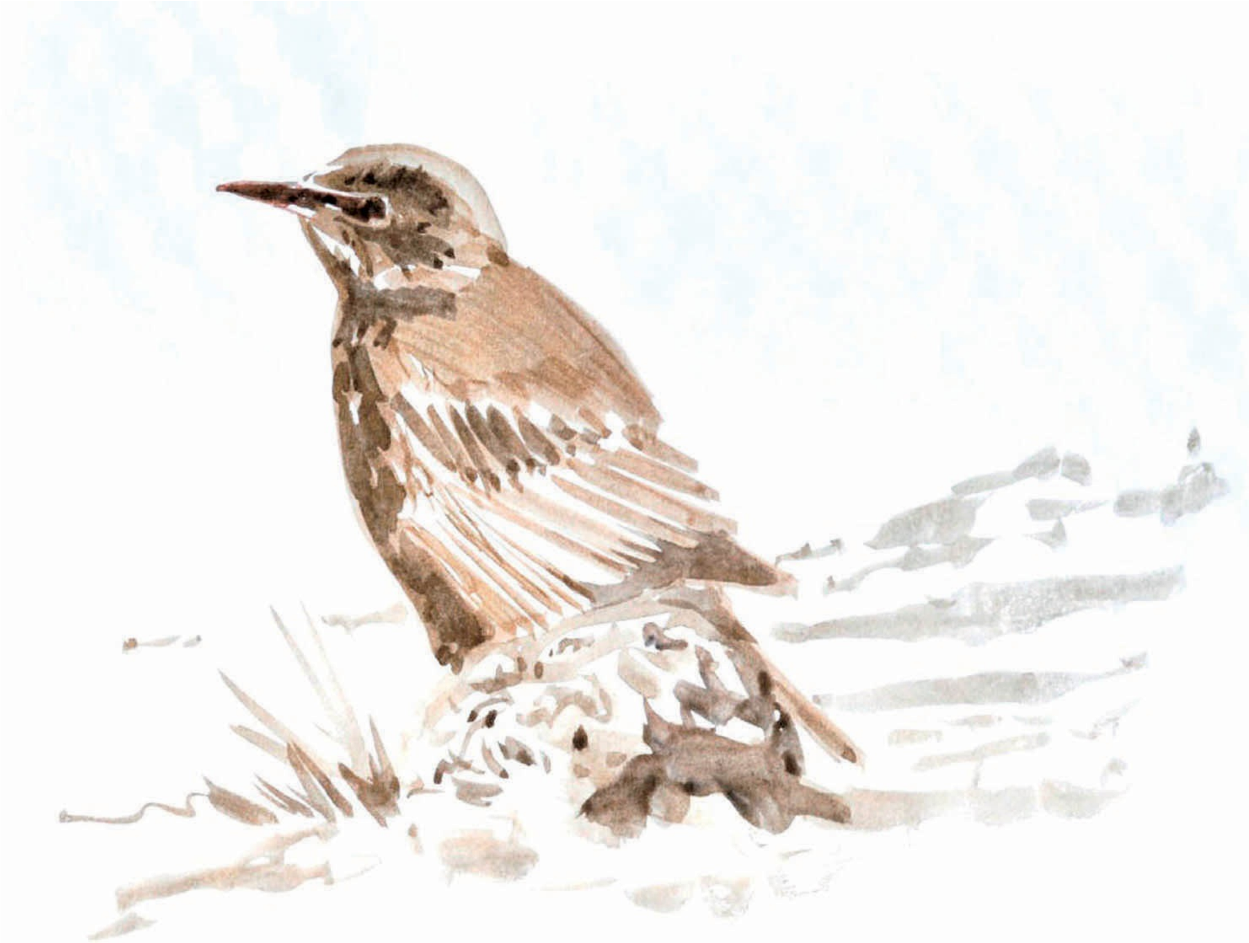
Drawing with wash

Drawing with wash is a hybrid technique sharing much in common with pure draughtsmanship and having the expressive freedom of watercolour. It is also a very quick way of working: the brush can be made to switch from making lines to filling areas of tone instantaneously. The technique removes the need for a preliminary underdrawing and allows you to express lights and shadows efficiently.

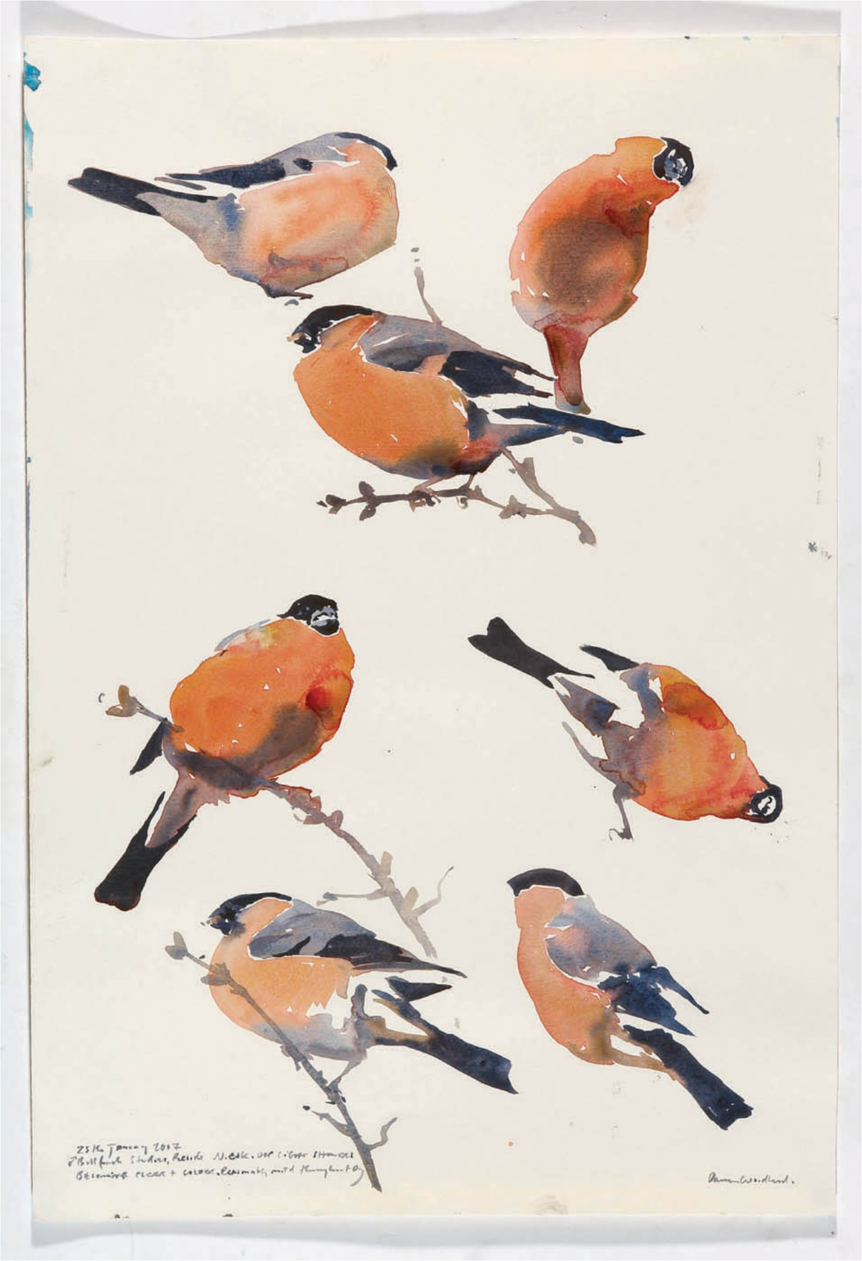


Tim Wootton: long-eared owl. During a session working in the field I alternated between pencil studies of this roosting bird, and watercolour work – using the drying time required for the painting to make pencil drawings. I used separate sheets of paper clipped onto a board – these could be removed and left to dry, leaving me unhindered to continue working.

unhindered to continue working.



Alan Dalton: juvenile starling. Wash sketch using raw umber as the hue. The bulk of the bird’s general colouration is first laid onto the paper leaving the secondary flight feathers clear. With the addition of high-contrast shadow lines in the wing, the glossy nature of this area is perfectly rendered. Darker tones along the breast and head are produced by a second application of the wash once dry enough.

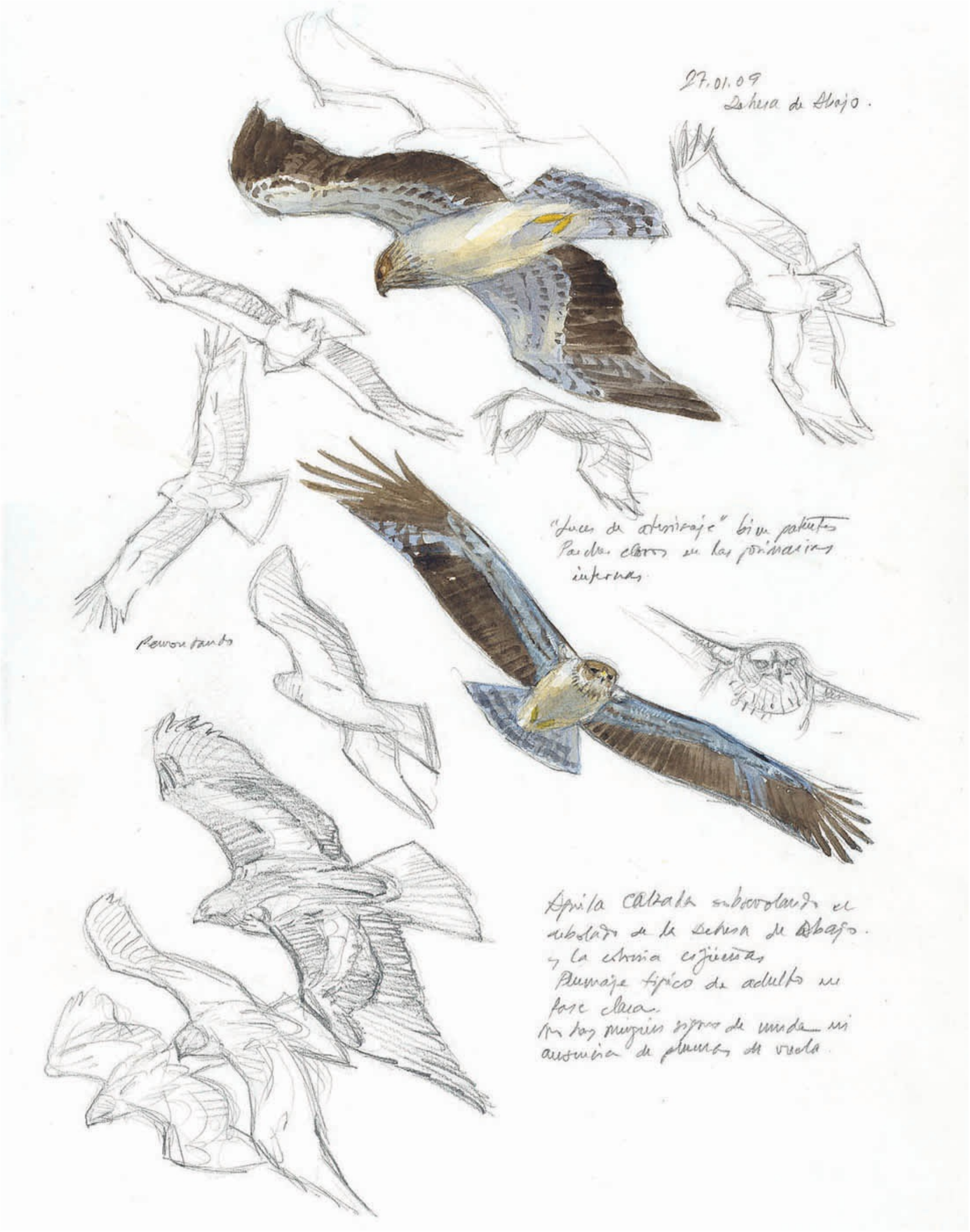


Darren Woodhead: bullfinches. The ability to see form and capture movement intuitively is required to produce studies such as these. The introduction of colour makes a strong connection to real life.

FLIGHT

Perhaps the most obvious difference between most mammals and birds is the power of flight and it is this supremacy in the air that is possibly the single facet we covet most. It contributes to the sense of ethereality that tiny birds have, and can embody a suggestion of enormous power and dynamism. No one aspect of being symbolizes ‘the bird’ more than its ability to fly and no single feature of the bird is more difficult for the artist to capture and express. But it can be done.

As with all aspects of study, start with the most accessible and achievable goals; drawing birds in flight is all about confidence (backed up with a few basic principles). Study the anatomy of the bird you are aiming to portray; the respective lengths of wing bones and the general shape of the wing are vital details of character, which group birds of similarity together and can be so specific as to relate to a single species and no other. The method of flight is also diagnostic and ought to be observed and understood if the resulting drawings are to relate to the bird.


27.01.09
Dehesa de Abajo.
"Luces de aterrizaje" bien patentes
Parches claros en las primarias
internas
Remontando
Águila calzada sobrevolando el
arbolado de la Dehesa de Abajo.
y la colonia cigüeñas
Plumaje típico de adulto en
fase clara.
Sin los mayores signos de muda ni
ausencia de plumas de vuelo.

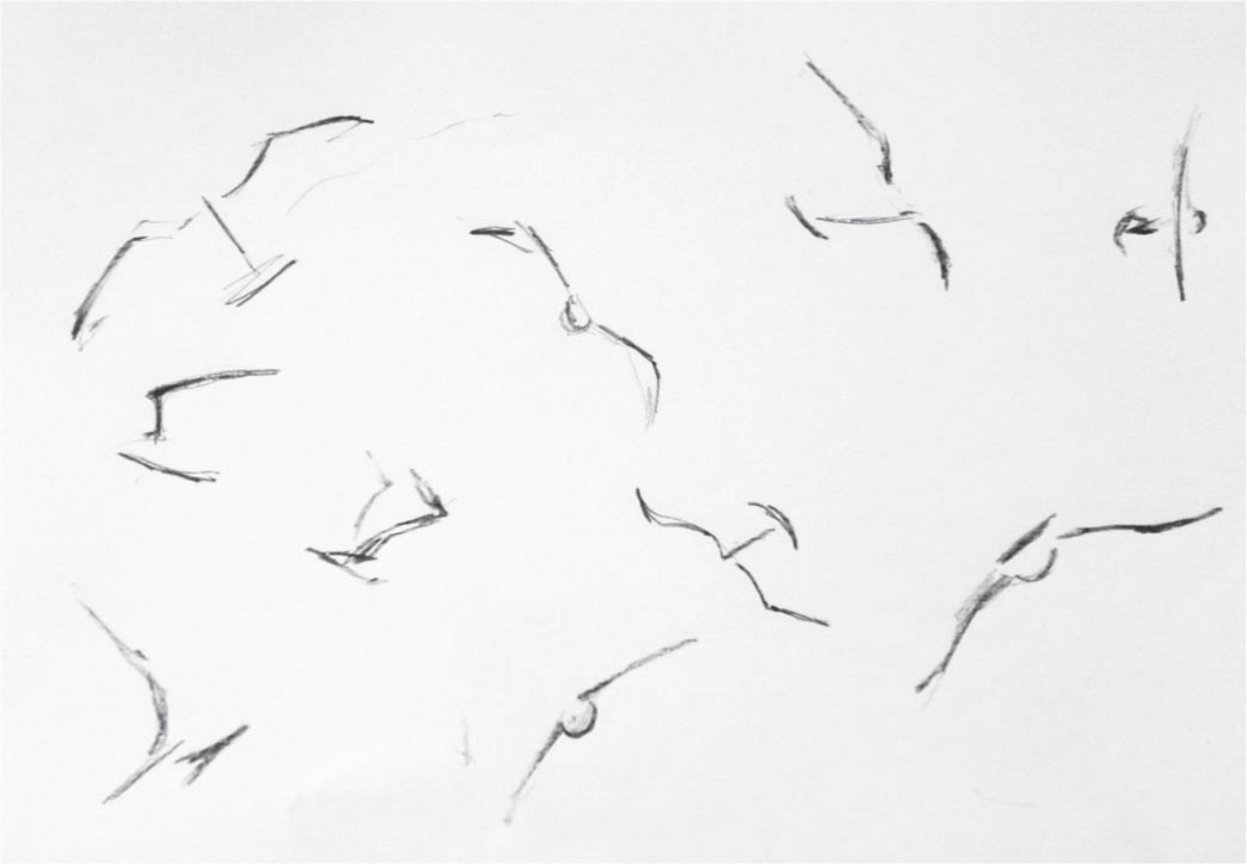
Juan Varela: booted eagle. (First published in *Entre Mar y Tierra/Between Sea and Land*, Lynx Edicions, Barcelona.)

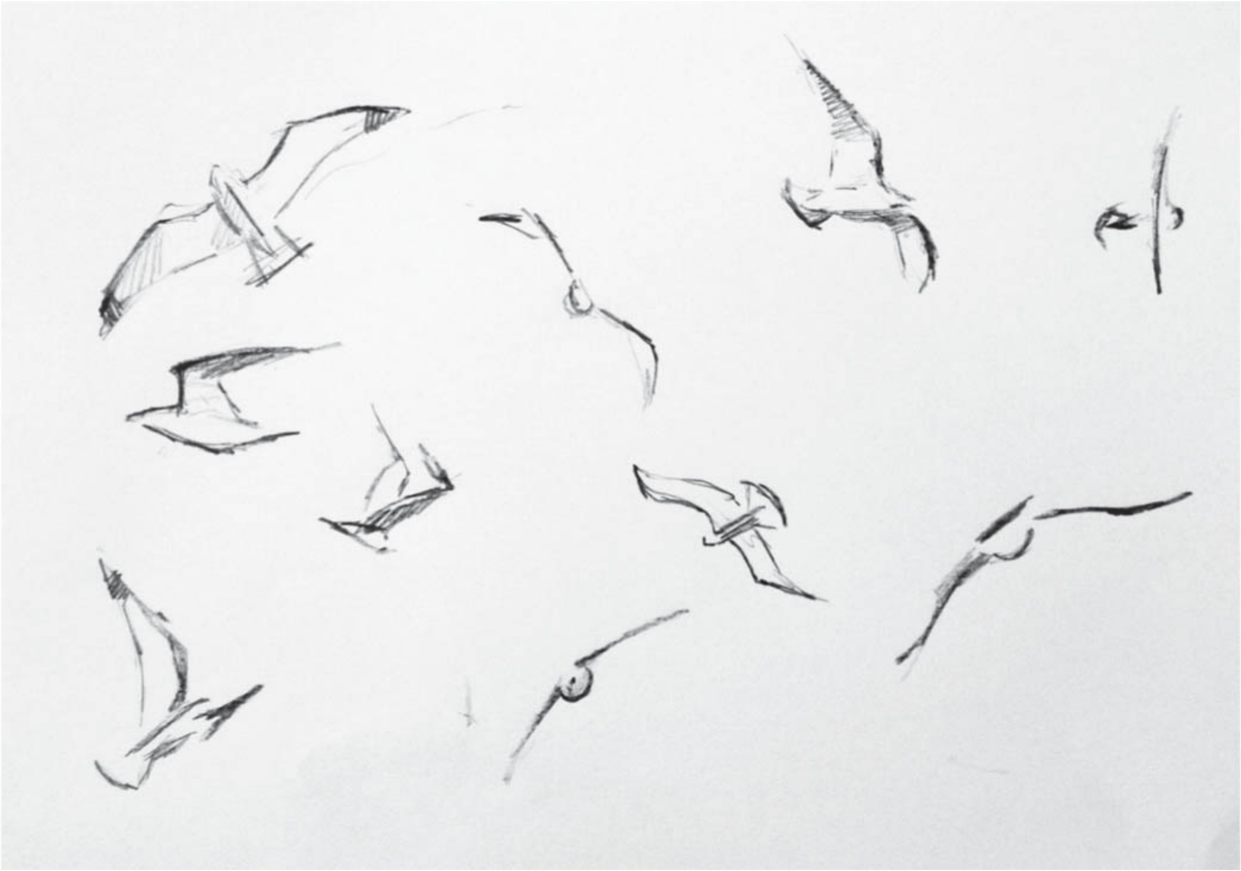
Large birds such as eagles and hawks, storks and cranes, swans, geese and gulls show their wing shapes well in flight, soaring and gliding much and using relatively slow movements of the wing. Smaller birds that rely on speed for capturing prey (or avoiding becoming that prey) can use wing beats so rapid that the shape of the wings cannot be discerned with the naked eye. When depicting species that fall into this category, it is important for the artist to convey the suggestion of movement or else it is quite likely that the resulting work will have the effect of ‘freezing’ the bird in time and space. (Unless there is some specific creative or personal reason for doing it, this ought to be avoided.) There are techniques that the artist can deploy to convey the idea of this rapidity of movement; these are discussed in Chapter 6. To begin with, we will look at some birds that offer the opportunity to study wing shape and action whilst in flight. As mentioned above, the larger birds are the ones to focus on and, unless one has access to a captive bird of prey which can be watched on its exercise flights, we should look to common species. Geese and swans are conspicuous in flight, but tend to be ‘going somewhere’ and opportunities could be sparse (although strategically placing oneself at a well-used winter roost can present excellent prospects of watching geese alighting), whereas gulls are fairly ubiquitous and readily available to the artist. Besides the obvious haunts of the coast, harbours and islands, gulls are found in numbers at gravel pits, refuse tips and agricultural land as well as in many towns and cities.

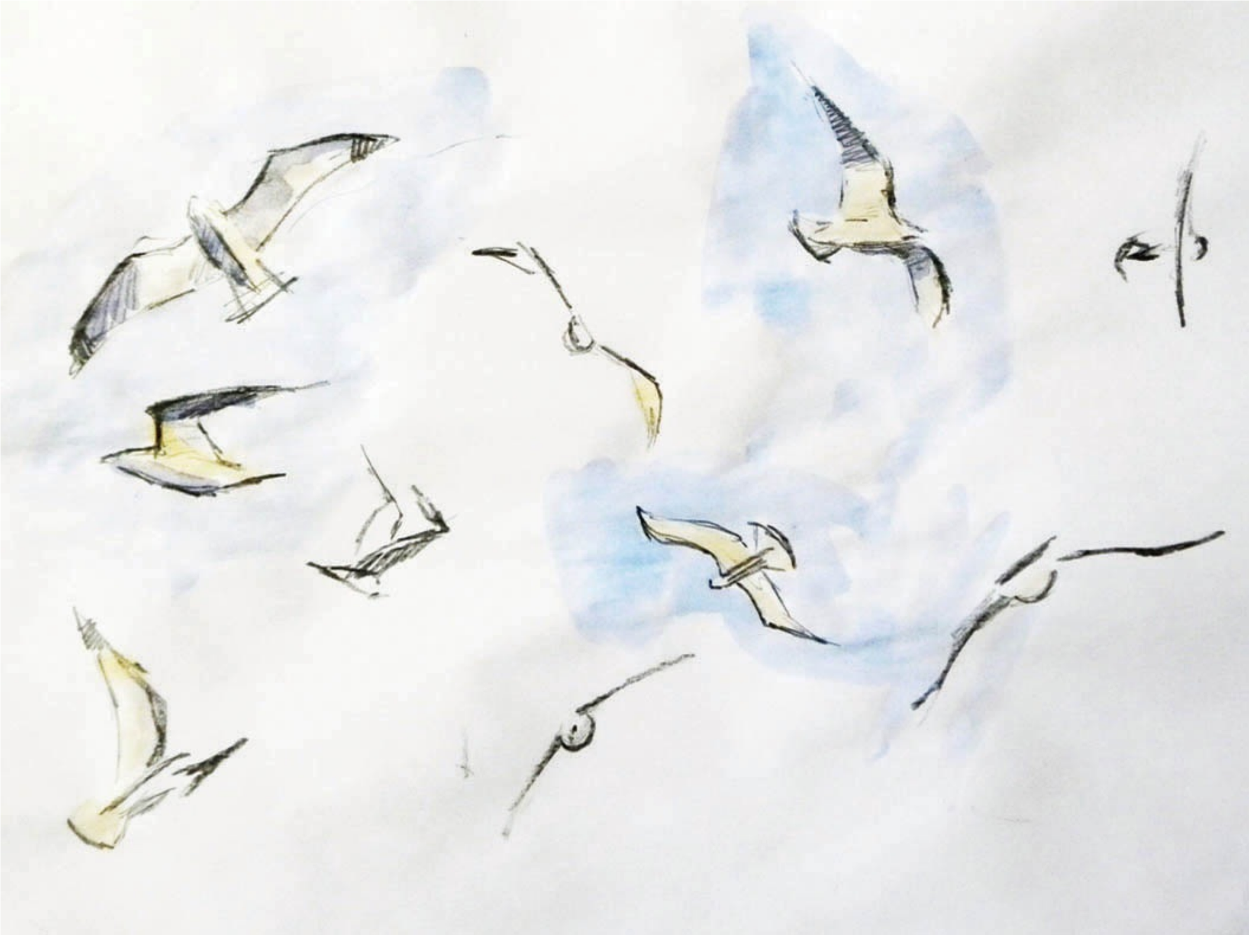
Birdwatching and drawing from sea cliffs presents a variety of aspects of view. Besides the usual angles as the birds fly overhead, eye-to-eye and views from above give a real sense of sharing the air with them. In the breeding season the birds will be everywhere and there is apparent chaos; however, if you spend a little time watching it will soon become clear that certain patterns emerge. Birds will take similar courses along the cliff face, regularly repeating shapes and poses as they do so. Recognizing these patterns is very helpful to the artist and anticipating the next beat in the rhythm will have you prepared to see the desired shapes and lines, and to get them down on paper.

When drawing birds in flight I find it helpful to try to imagine I’m flying; that is, I hold my arms outstretched as a gull’s wings might be, angle my wrists and elbows and see if I can ‘feel’ the air lifting me. It may look a little strange, but I can assure you it helps to get in the right mental state, to start to understand how it might feel were I able to glide on the air. Watch how the birds change the shape of their wings, offering different angles and alternate planes of their wings to compensate for and utilize best any changes in wind strength and direction as it eddies around the cliffs. Observe the twist and slant of the tail in its role as rudder.

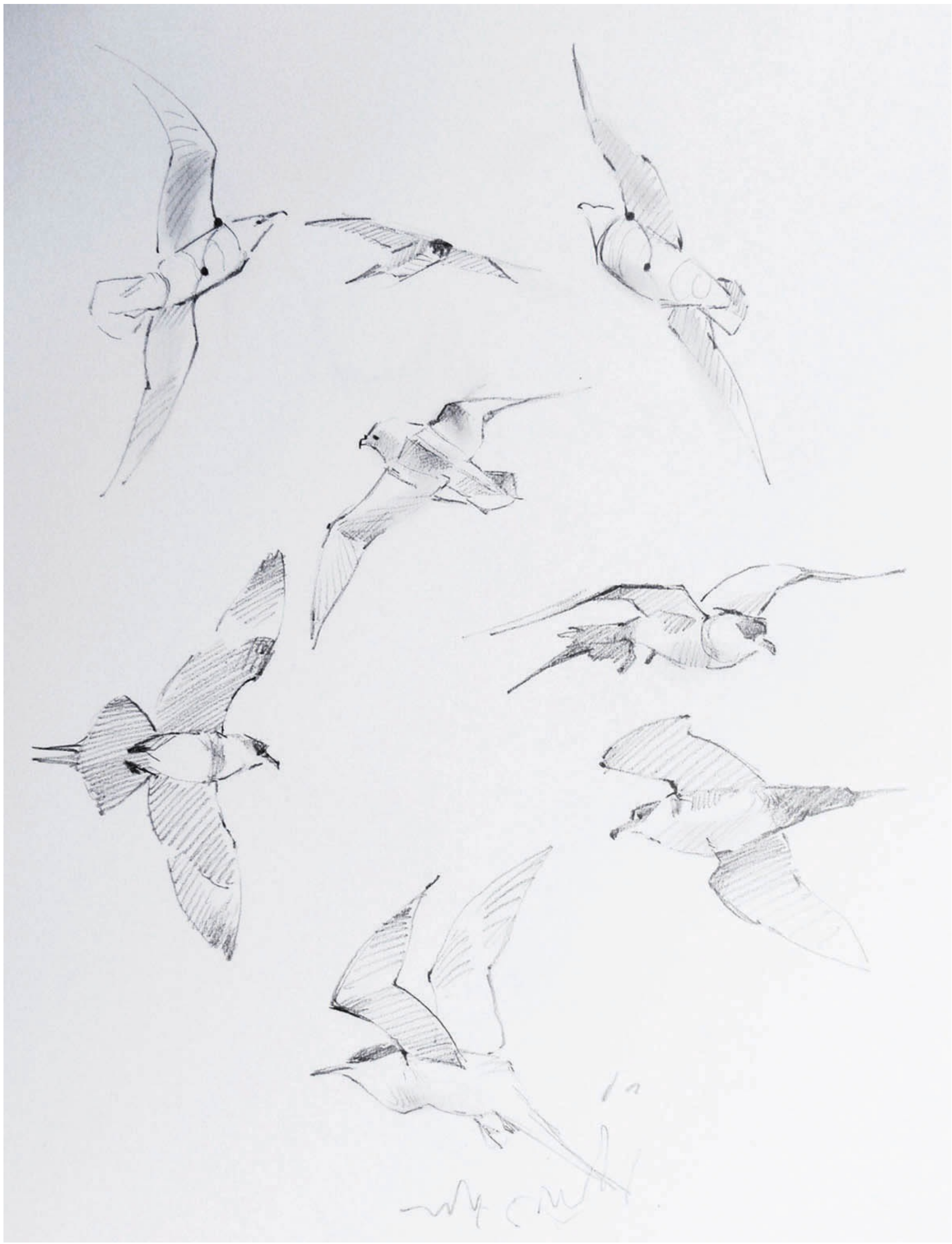
When starting out on a drawing session, look to the simple and obvious lines which describe the bird and the direction it is moving, and draw the bird’s spine along that axis. Wings can be quickly suggested by a simple ‘W’ shape – make many gestural drawings just as fast as the action happens, and be aware of the patterns in front of you. The simple lines can be added to as birds resume similar attitudes during the session.







Tim Wootton: angles and momentum. Simple and immediate representations of seabirds in flight are made; secondly the wings and bodies are fleshed out by adding trailing edges; finally a wash of yellow ochre and blue places the drawings in the air.

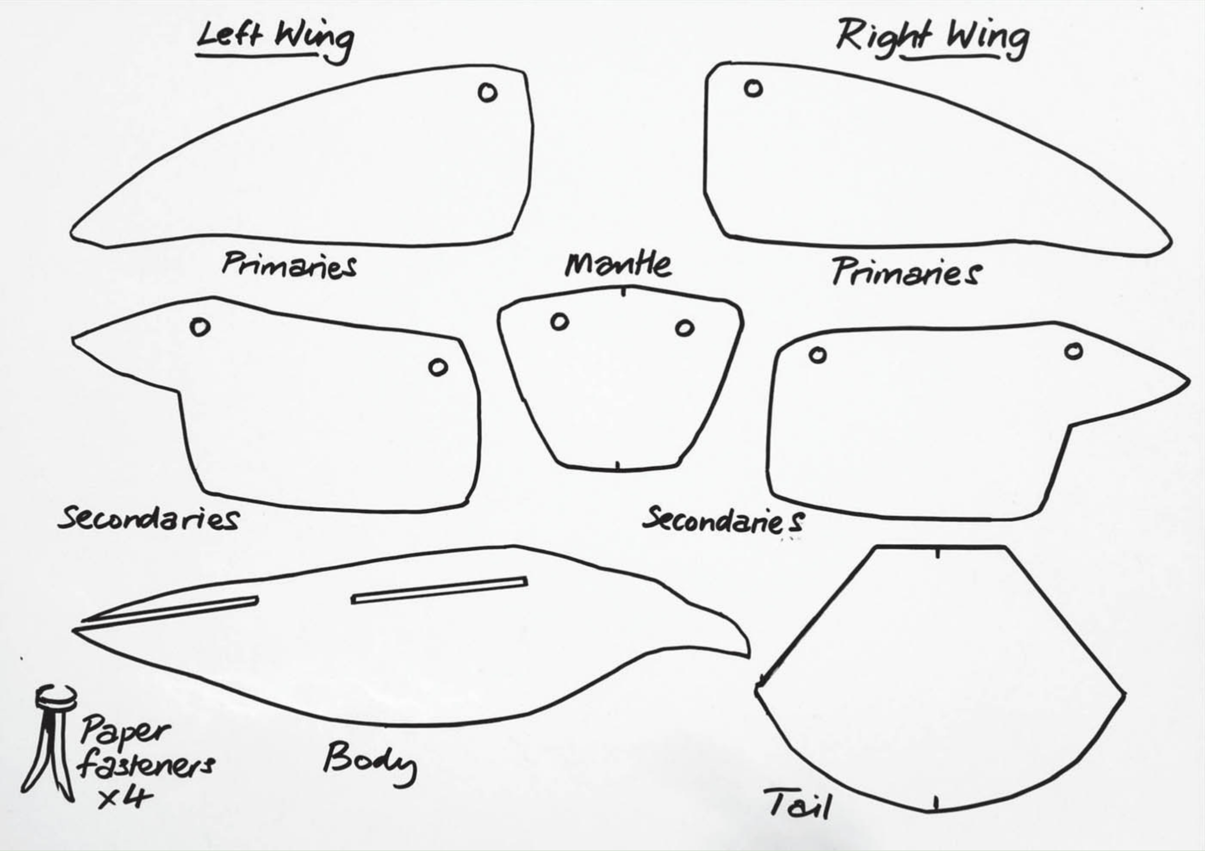


Tim Wootton: wing perspective in flying birds. I have marked the ‘exit point’ with two dots of the wings on the two gulls in flight at the top of the page; note they are opposite each other, on the same perspective as the body – there’s also a very geometric peregrine up there somewhere. Arctic skuas and a fulmar, and an arctic tern (bottom of the picture) emerging from a dive.

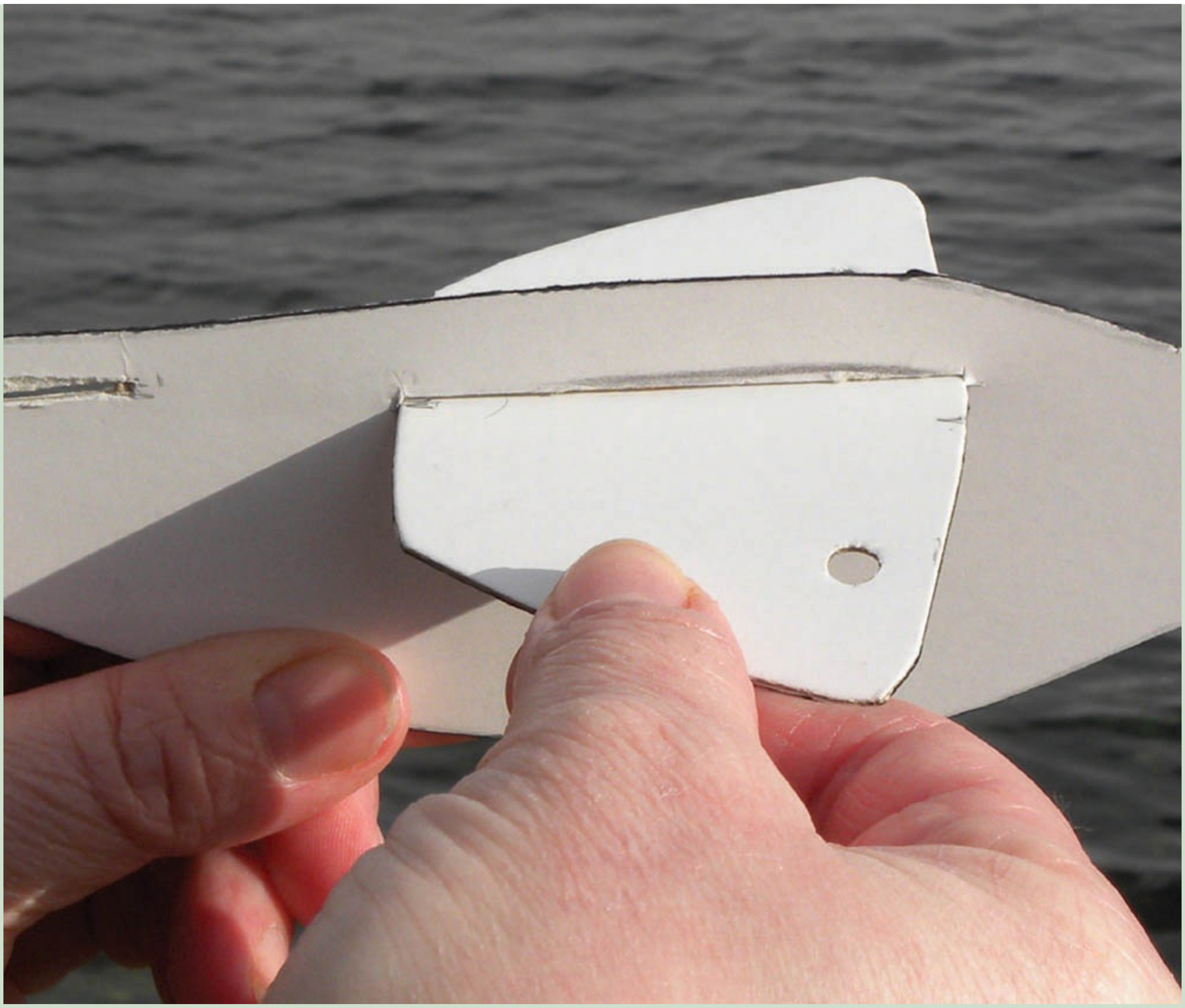
A photographic memory would be an advantage in this situation, but if you don’t have one, it may be possible to cultivate one. We are told to draw what we can see and this is pretty good advice. But, in the case of moving birds there is no time to check back to see if what we've drawn is 'right'. Intuition and interpretation are skills we need to nurture. Watch the birds, check the wind direction and updraught – and select a species to study. Gannets and fulmars are superb models for the artist, partly because they are quite unafraid of us and partly because where they are found, they are found in plenty. At their breeding cliffs and with a stiff onshore breeze, it is possible to sit with birds above your head and virtually in front of your face just hanging in the air.

MAKING AN ARTICULATED MODEL GULL

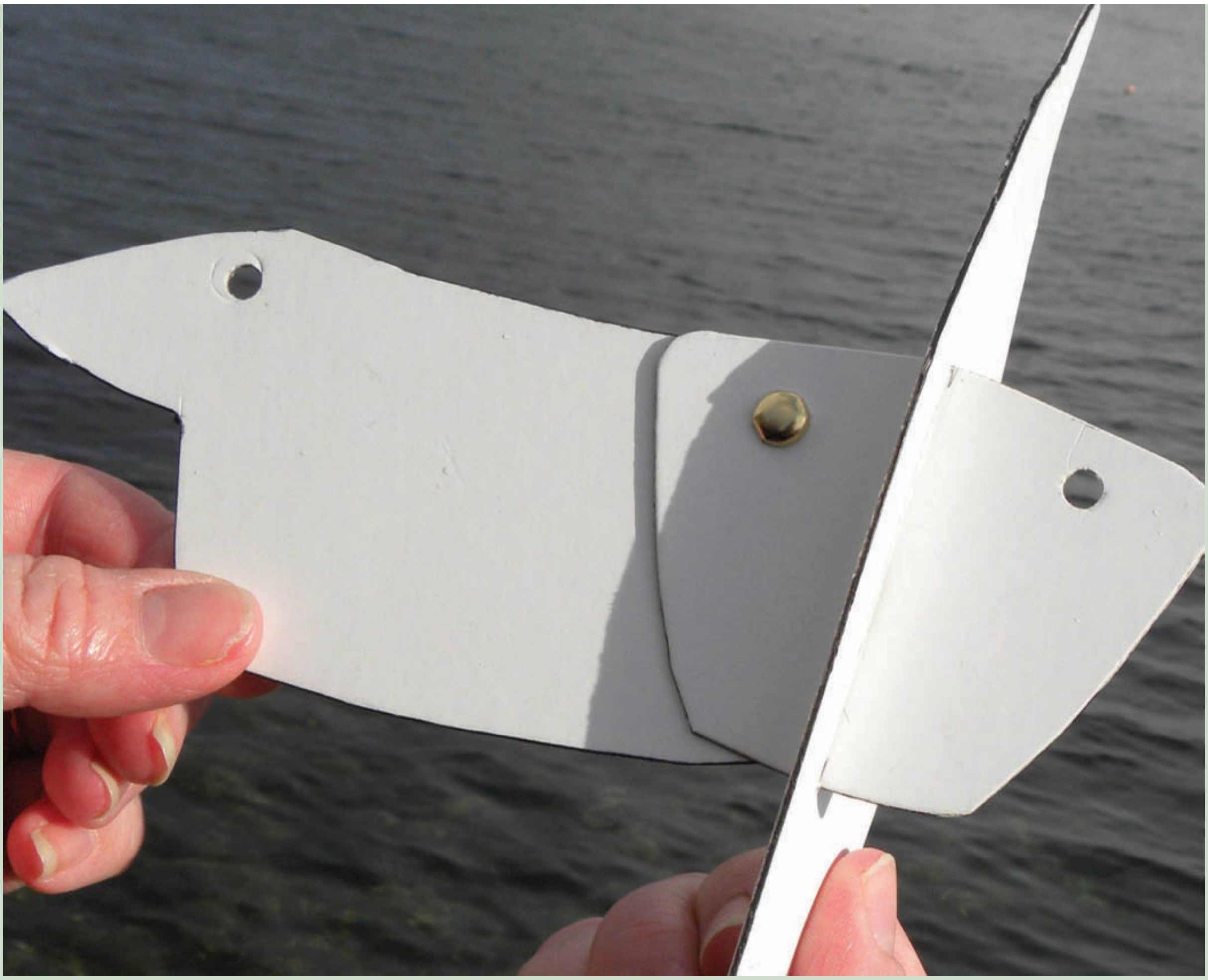
Enlarge this sheet to A3 and trace onto thin card. Cut out the shapes and punch holes as indicated. Assembly is as illustrated below.


Left Wing
Right Wing
Primaries
Mantle
Primaries
Secondaries
Secondaries
Paper fasteners x4
Body
Tail

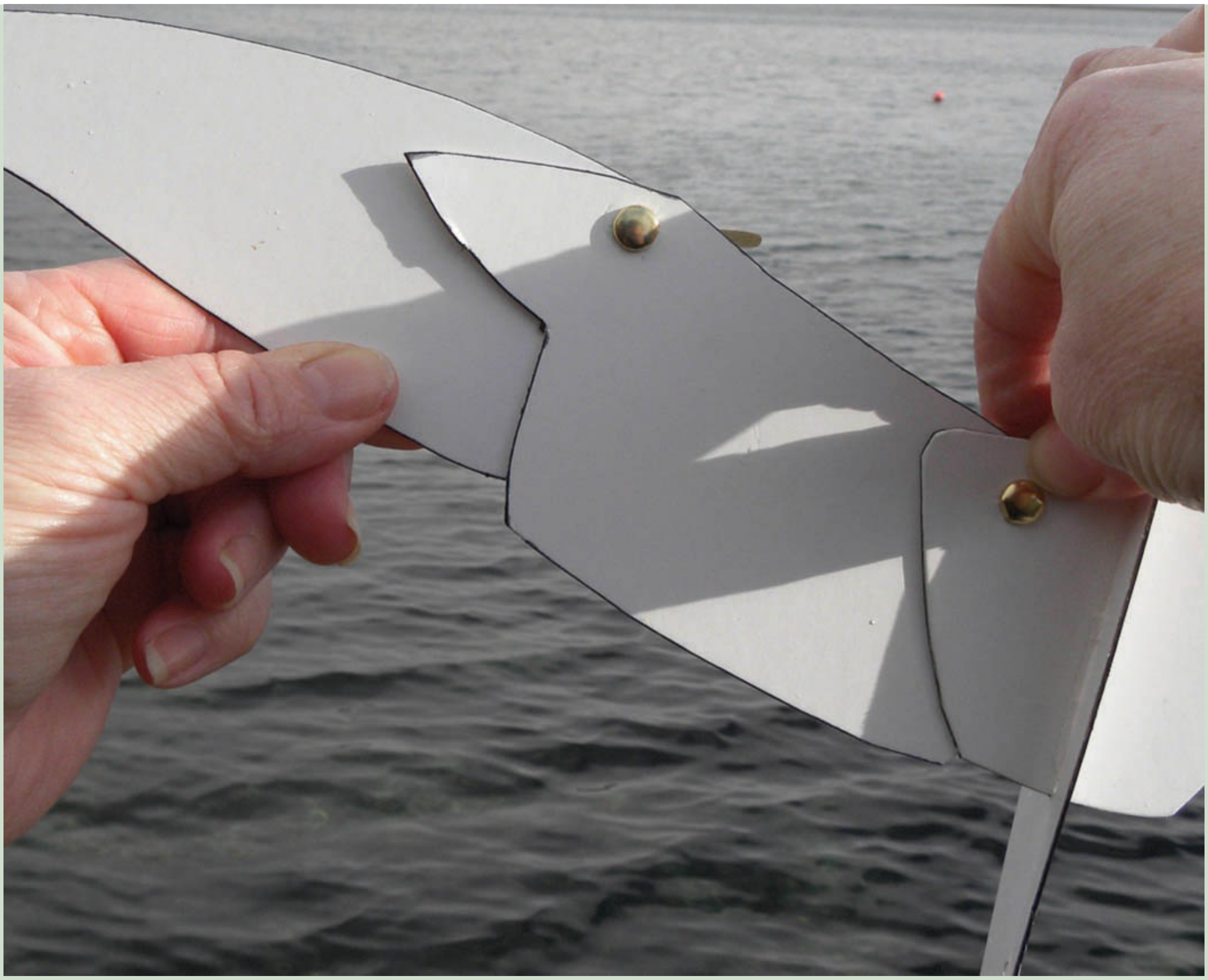
Template for an articulated gull.



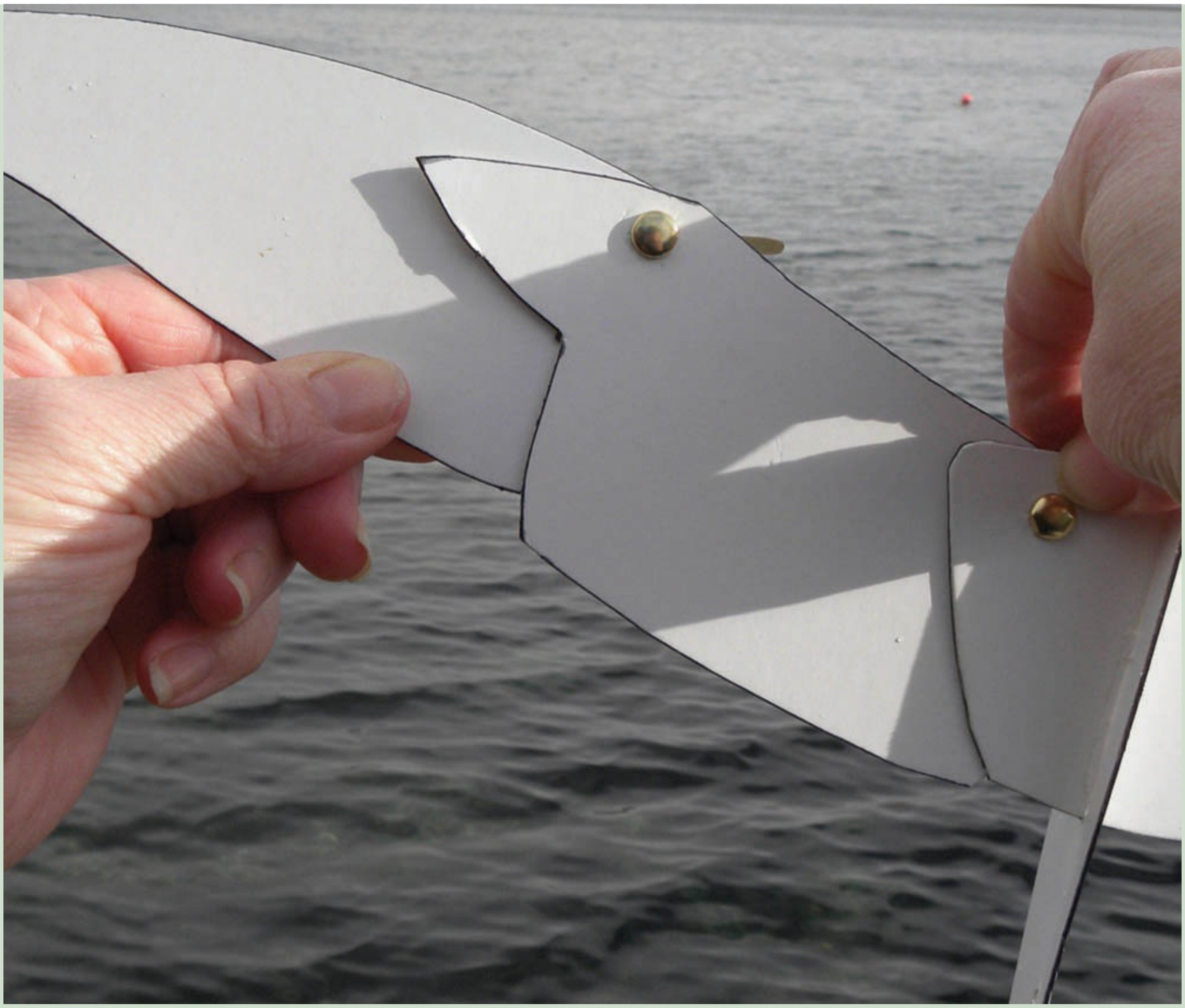
a) Slide the mantle through the slot.



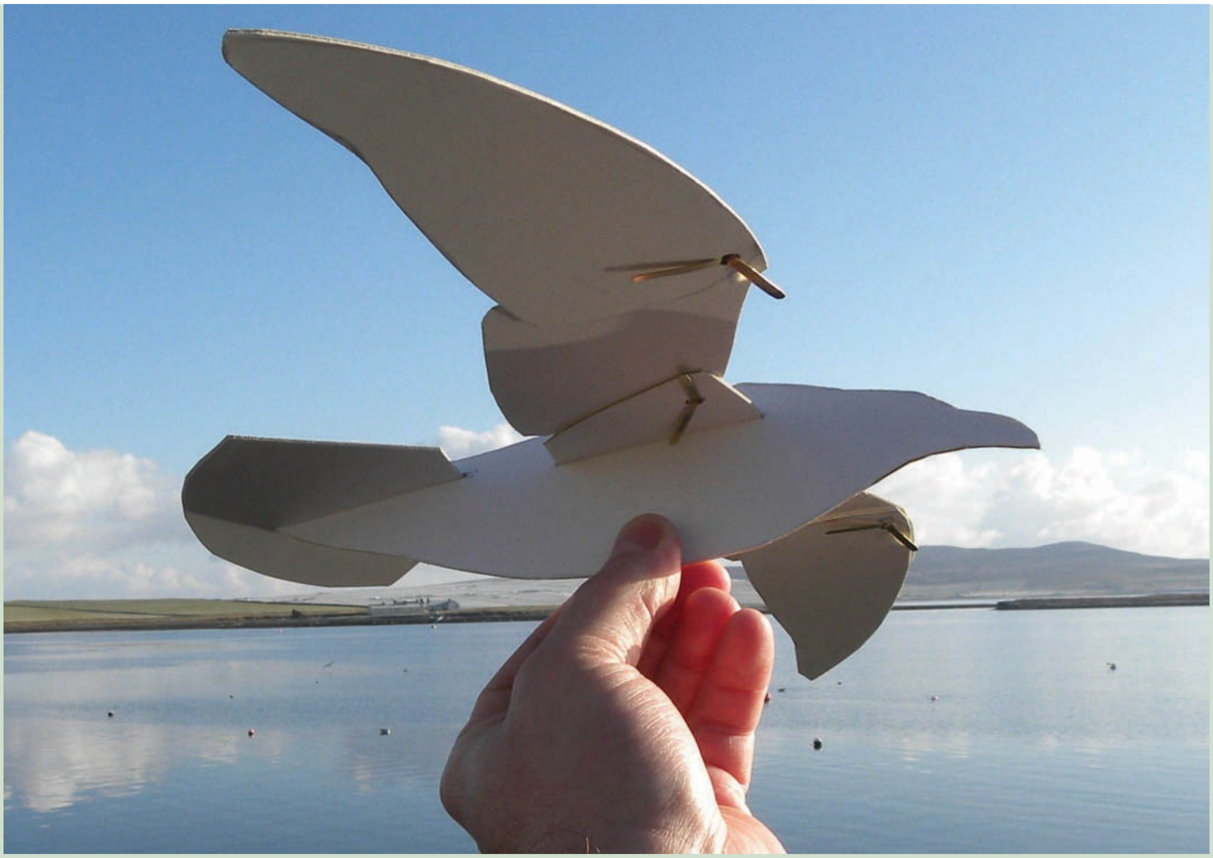
b) The secondaries are fastened to the mantle underside.

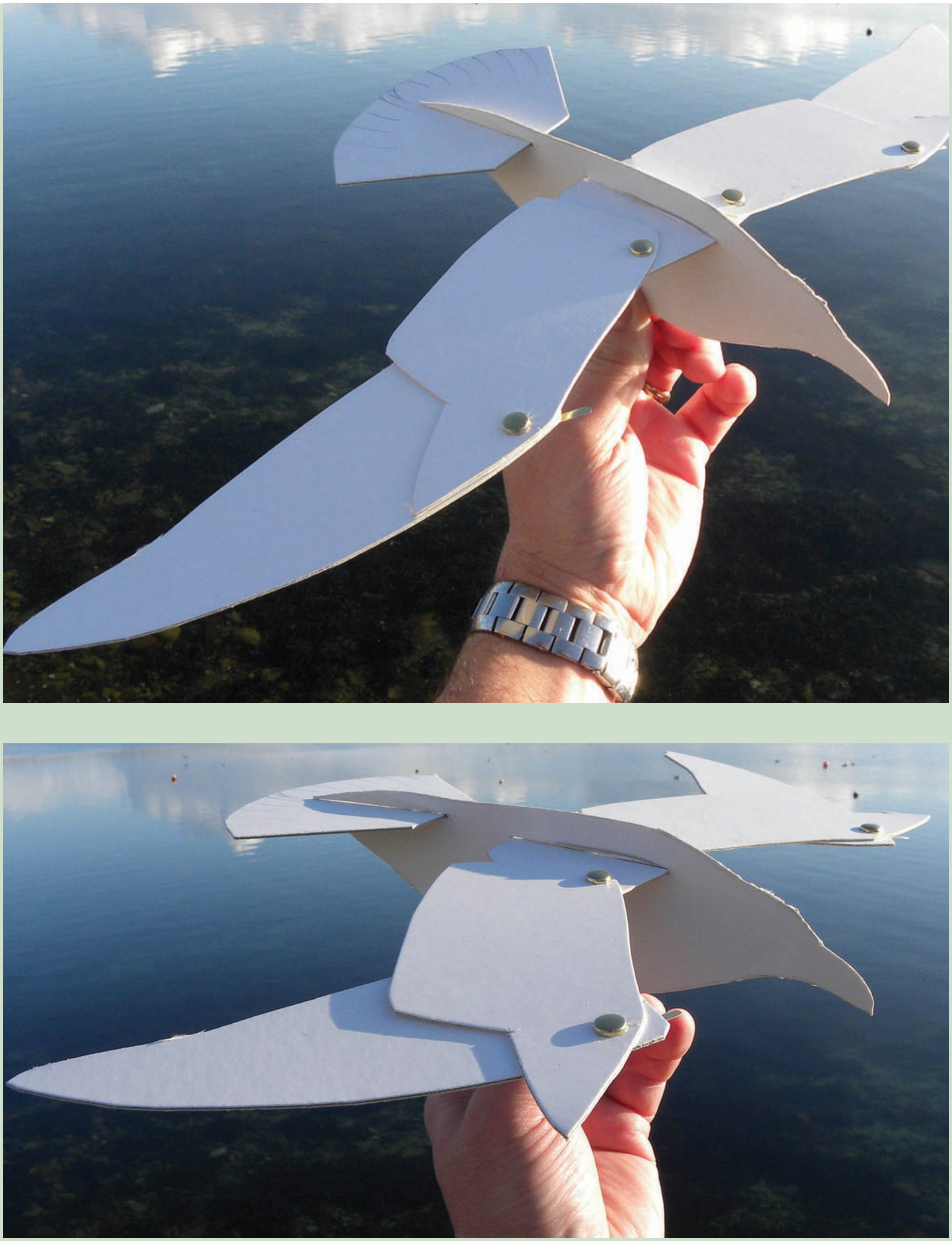


c) The primaries are fastened to the underside of the secondaries.



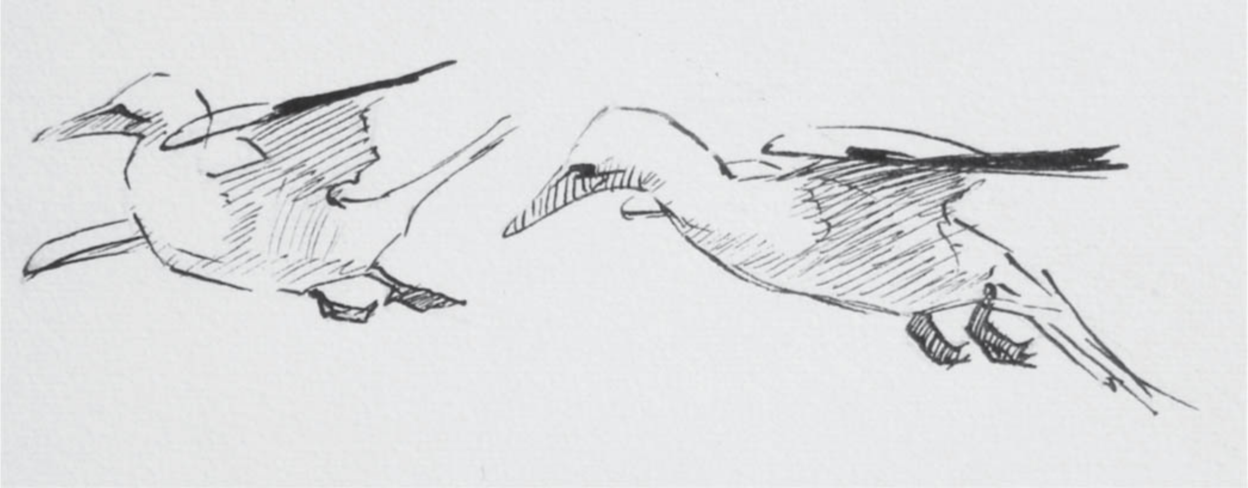
d) Attach the tail.





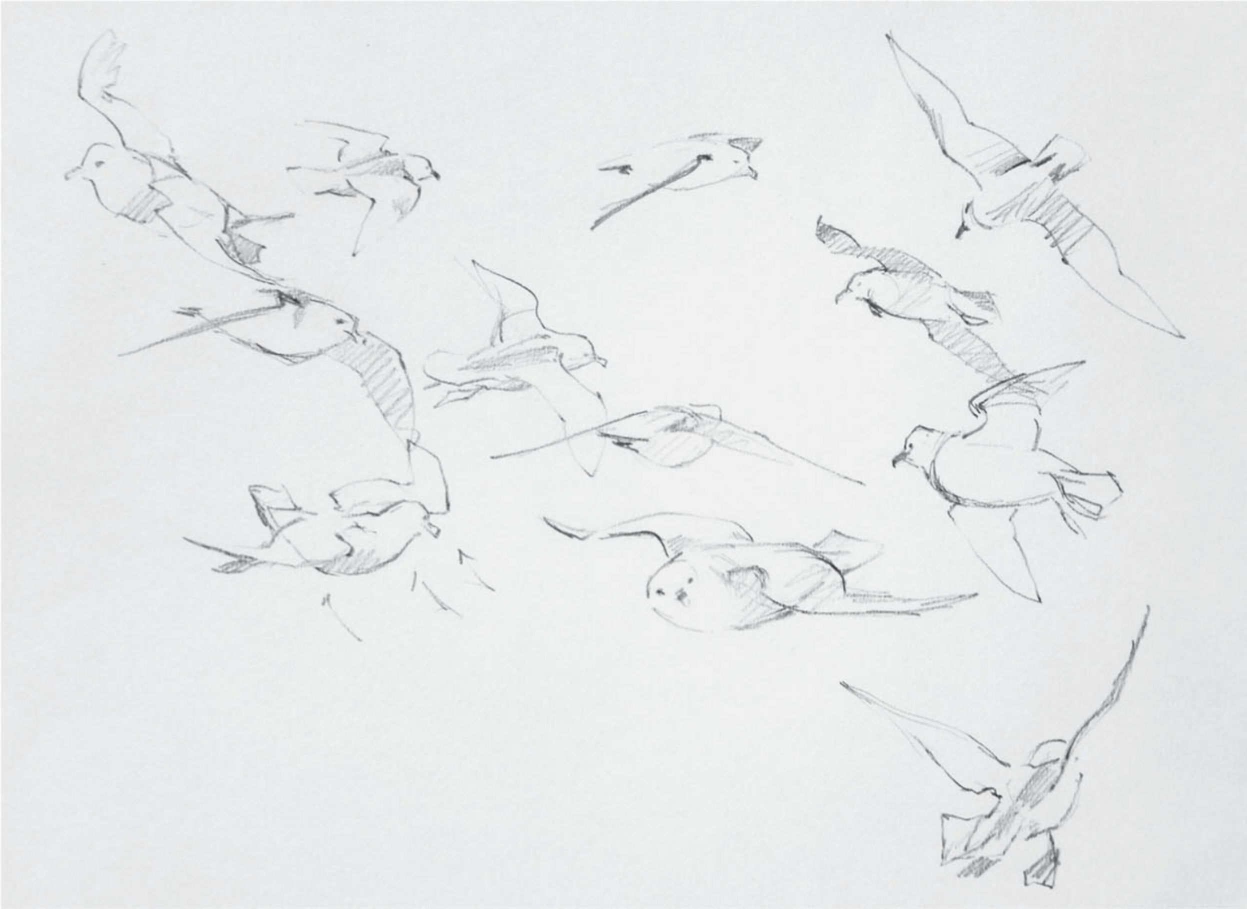
Wing shapes and perspectives.

The wings can be articulated more or less as in the real bird, offering a range of wing profiles. Turning the model in the air will help you to see the perspective of the wings (although being very close to you, this is much exaggerated and shouldn't be taken as representative of birds seen from a distance). It also helps to see where light may hit a real bird.



John Busby: *Gannets on the Wind*. Biro sketch.

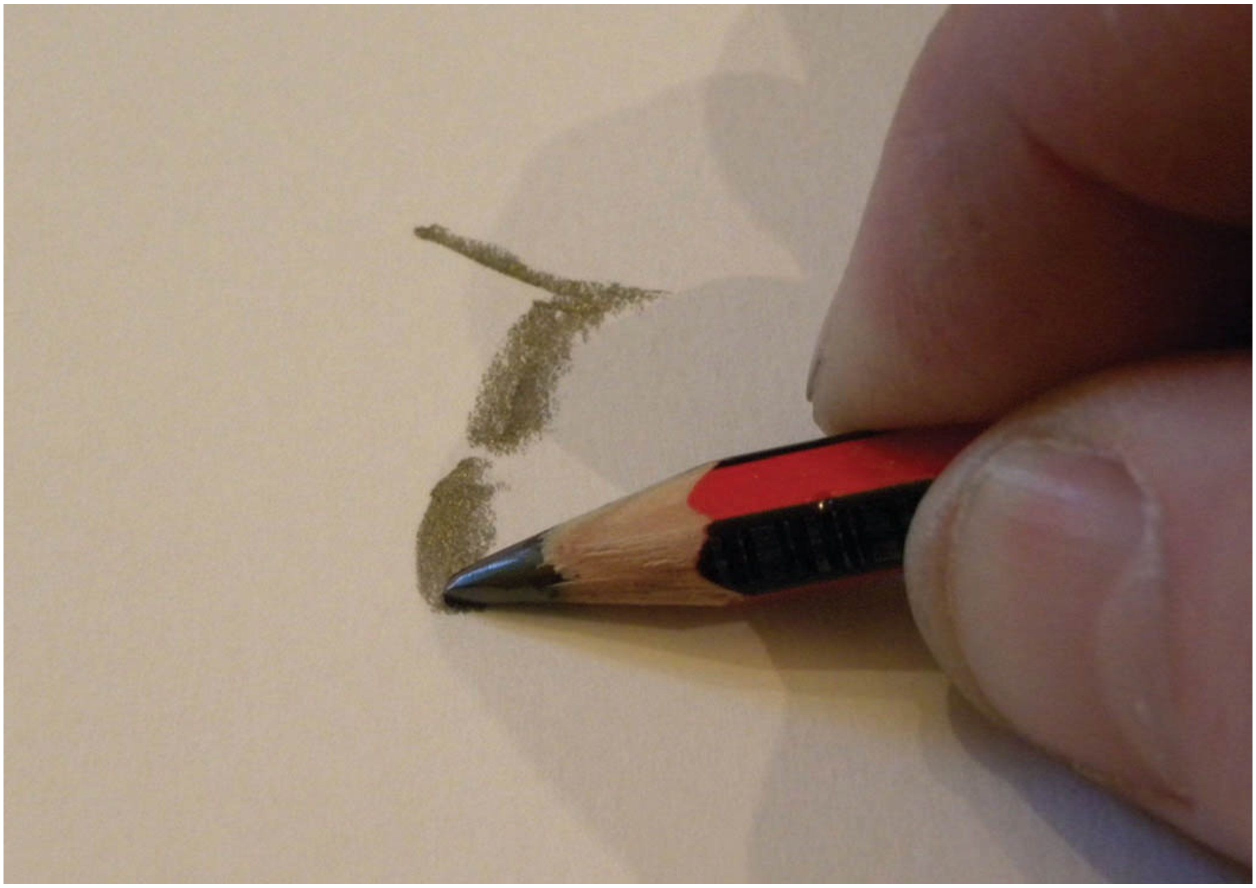
This is where the first exercise we did can be applied to a real situation. As on the still life, select a bird that you can see well, take note of the angle of its wings in relation to its body, how deep its chest is and how far up the bird's body the wings emerge and most importantly, try to visualize the negative space between the wings and the body (that is, try to describe to yourself whether there are acute triangles of light visible through the gaps, etc.). Once you feel you can 'see' the bird, take a snap-shot – in other words, snap your eyes closed and try to remember the shapes you could see and draw them immediately from memory. Stop drawing when you can't remember certain features, shapes, proportions and so on. Take your drawing and compare it to the bird the next time it's in a similar position – check proportions and angles. Soon you'll be able to see where the errors in the drawing are and you can correct them using the living bird as reference. The more you practise, the more success you will have when it comes to 'seeing' the moving bird.

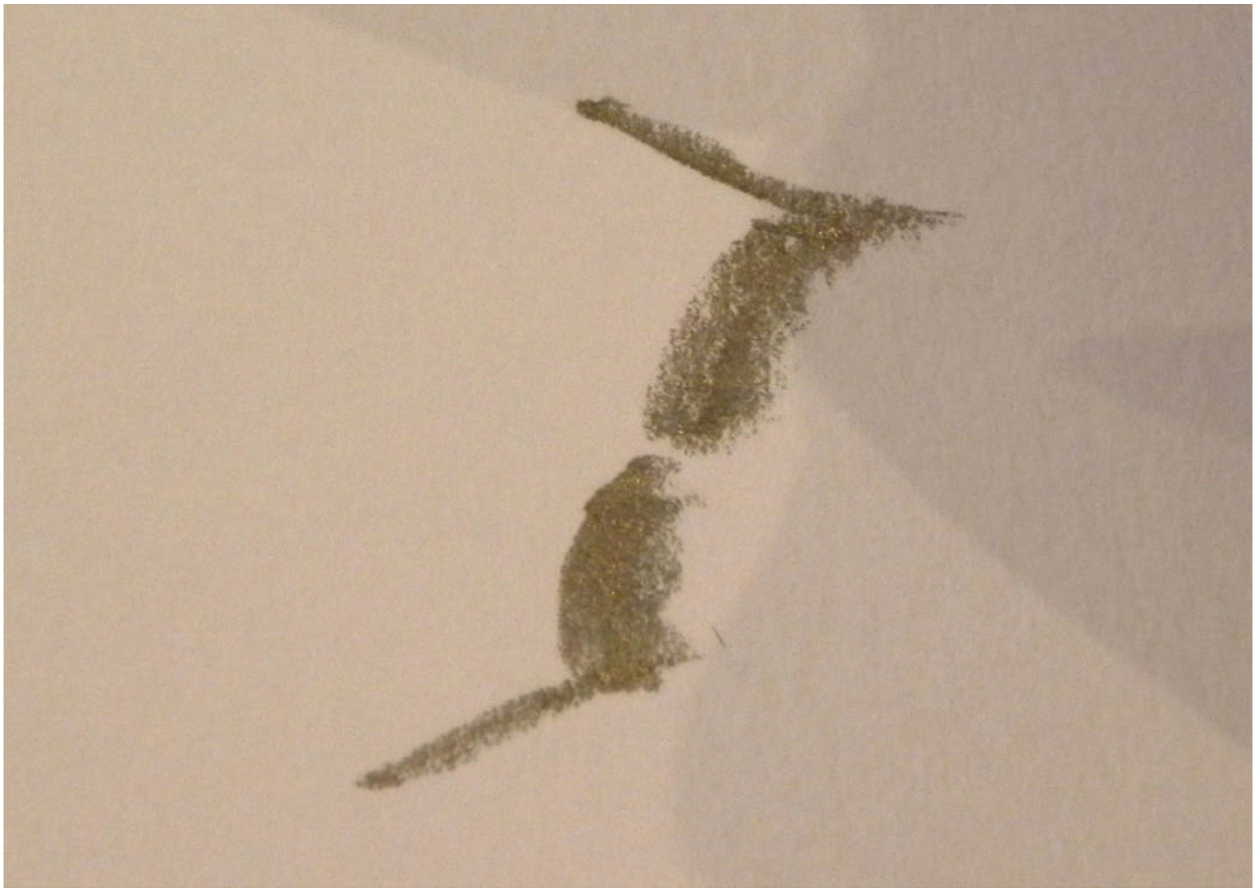


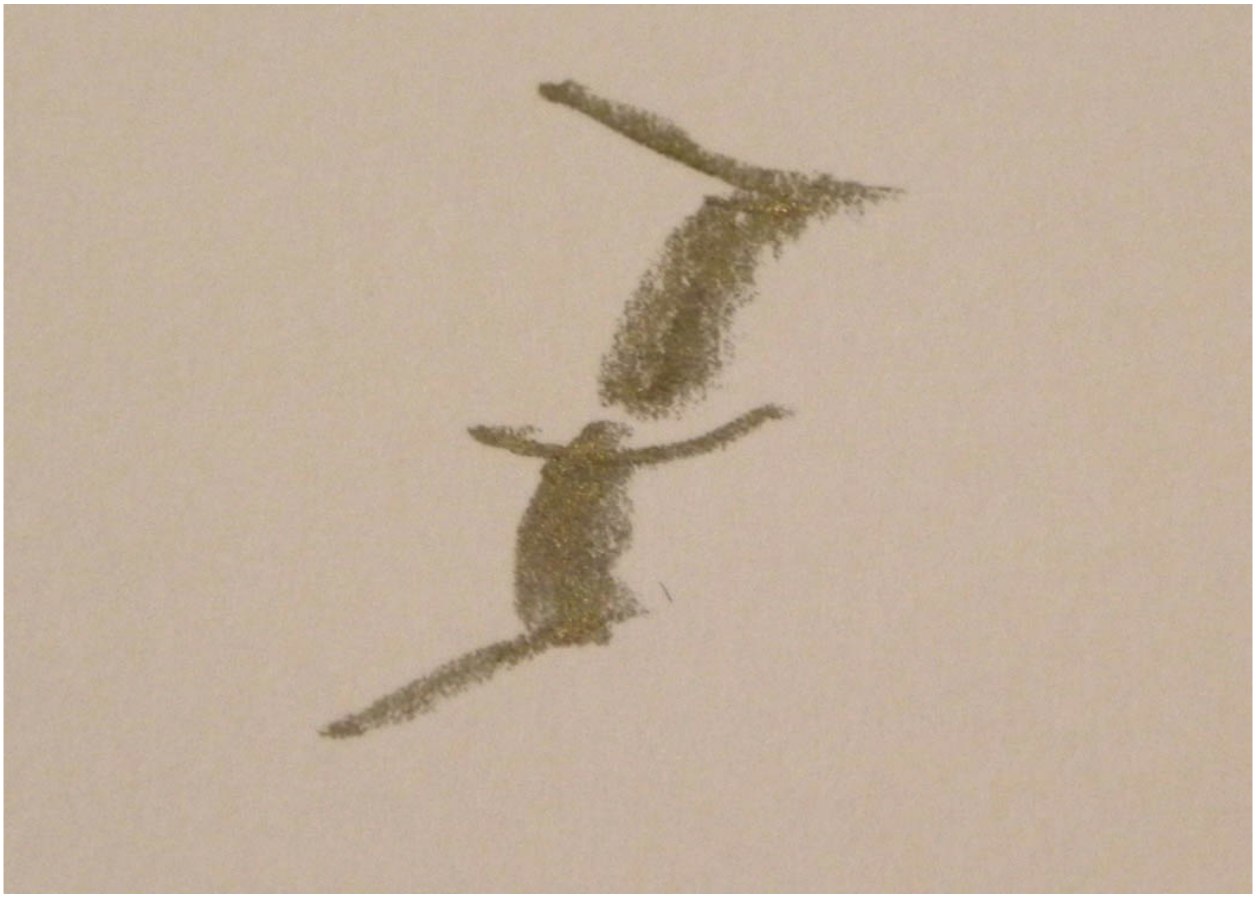
Tim Wootton: fulmar flight studies.

A step on from the exercise illustrated above is to use the sides of the pencil as well as the point. You can draw both the leading and trailing edges of the wings with one stroke; a useful device for capturing aspects of composition when watching flying birds as you can get shapes down very quickly.

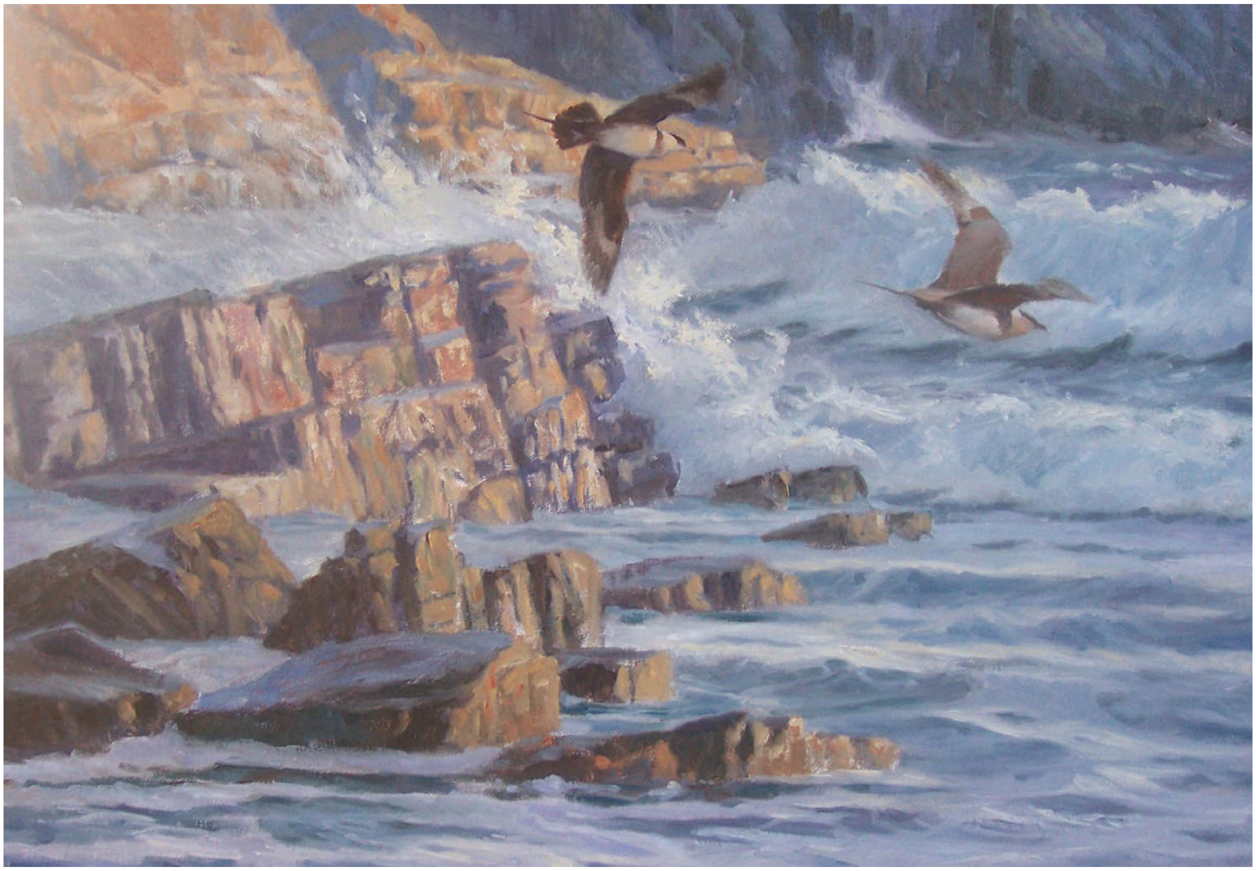
Birds in flight show feather masses and only the individual feathers that are very conspicuous may be discerned, such as the first four or five primary feathers on the wings of hawks, eagles and crows or specific tail feathers of some birds. The groups of feathers make sense when the bird is observed in flight.



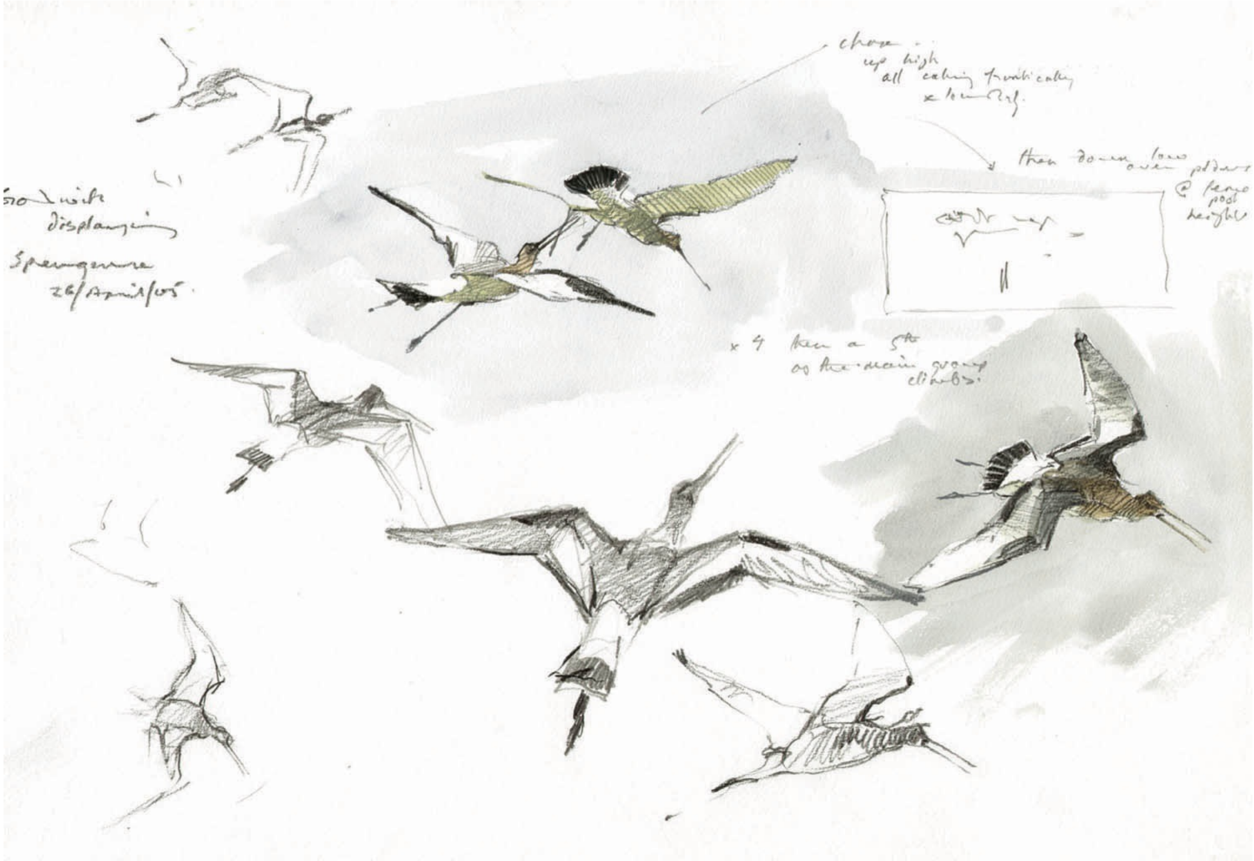




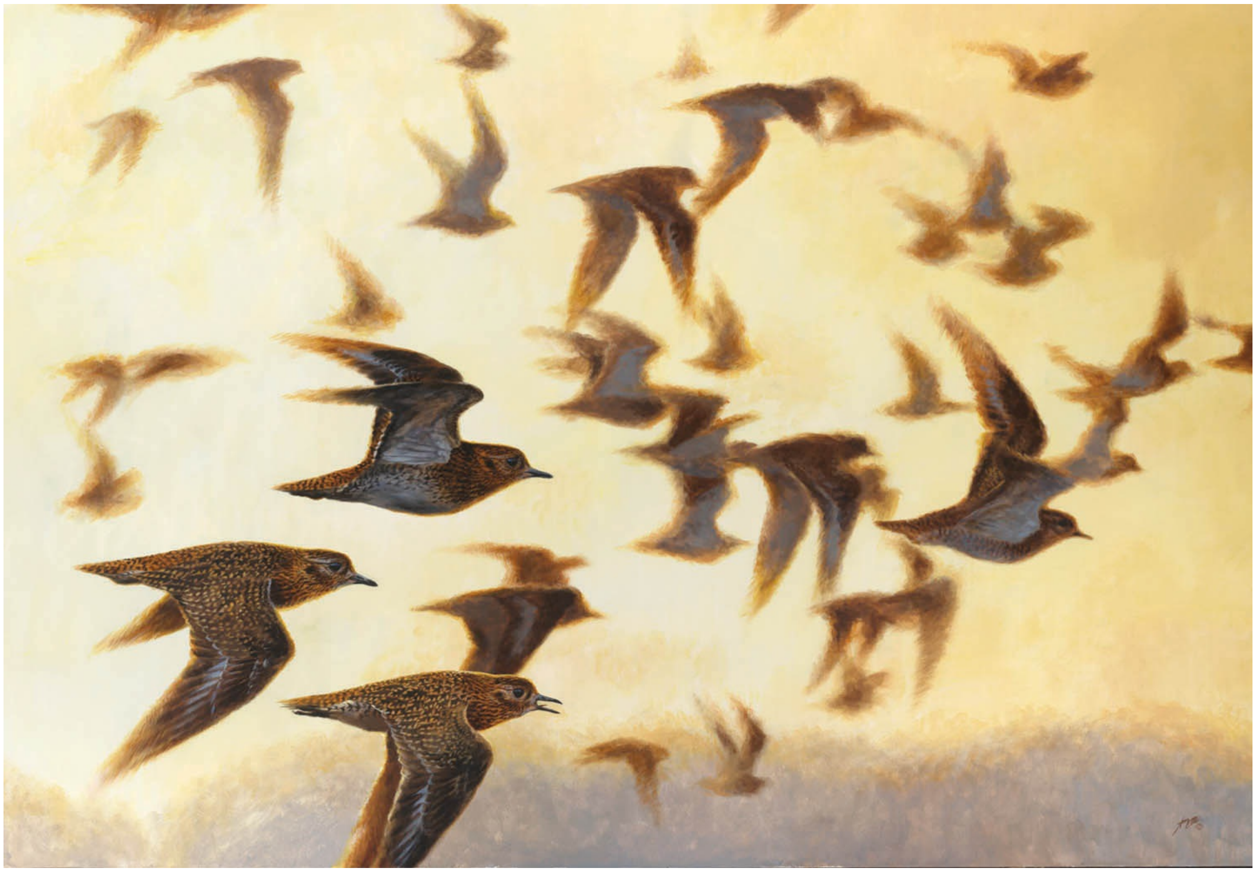
A shorthand for a flying gull.



Tim Wootton: arctic skuas. Oil on canvas. When at the coast the atmosphere has real body to it – salt and moisture laden – the light is affected in curious ways. I wanted the physical aspect of the air to play a major role in the way the colours are perceived in this piece.


chase –
up high
all calling frantically
× lots [illegible]
then down low
over polders
@ fence
post
height
odwits
displaying
Spengemere
26/April/05
× 4 then a 5th
as the main group
climbs.

Bruce Pearson: black-tailed godwits display flight. Pencil and wash; keenly observed action all over the page.



Andrew Ellis: golden plover flock. Acrylic on panel. The viewpoint and perspective puts us right there, in amongst the flock of plover. The focus slips slightly as the birds get further away from us, a device that creates depth in the piece but also takes the attention away from the more distant birds, allowing us to engage those closest. The wing tips, being in motion, are painted slightly sketchily, forming the impression of action – the golden light echoes the species name.

CHAPTER 3

ANATOMY

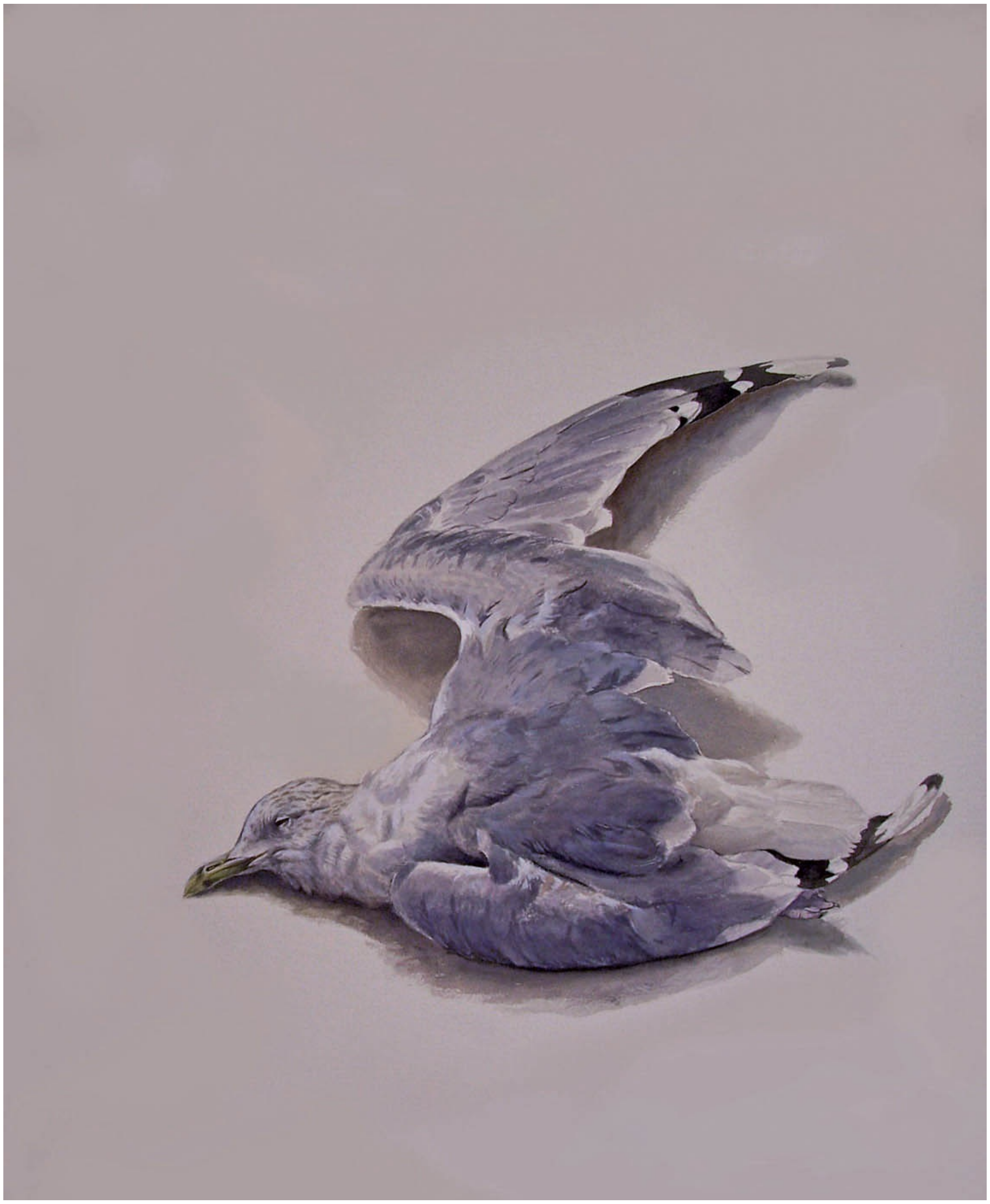
To suppose that the eye with all its inimitable contrivances for adjusting the focus to different distances, for admitting different amounts of light, and for the correction of spherical and chromatic aberration, could have been formed by natural selection; seems, I freely confess, absurd in the highest degree.

Charles Darwin

I wish I had eight pairs of hands, and another body to shoot the specimens.

John James Audubon

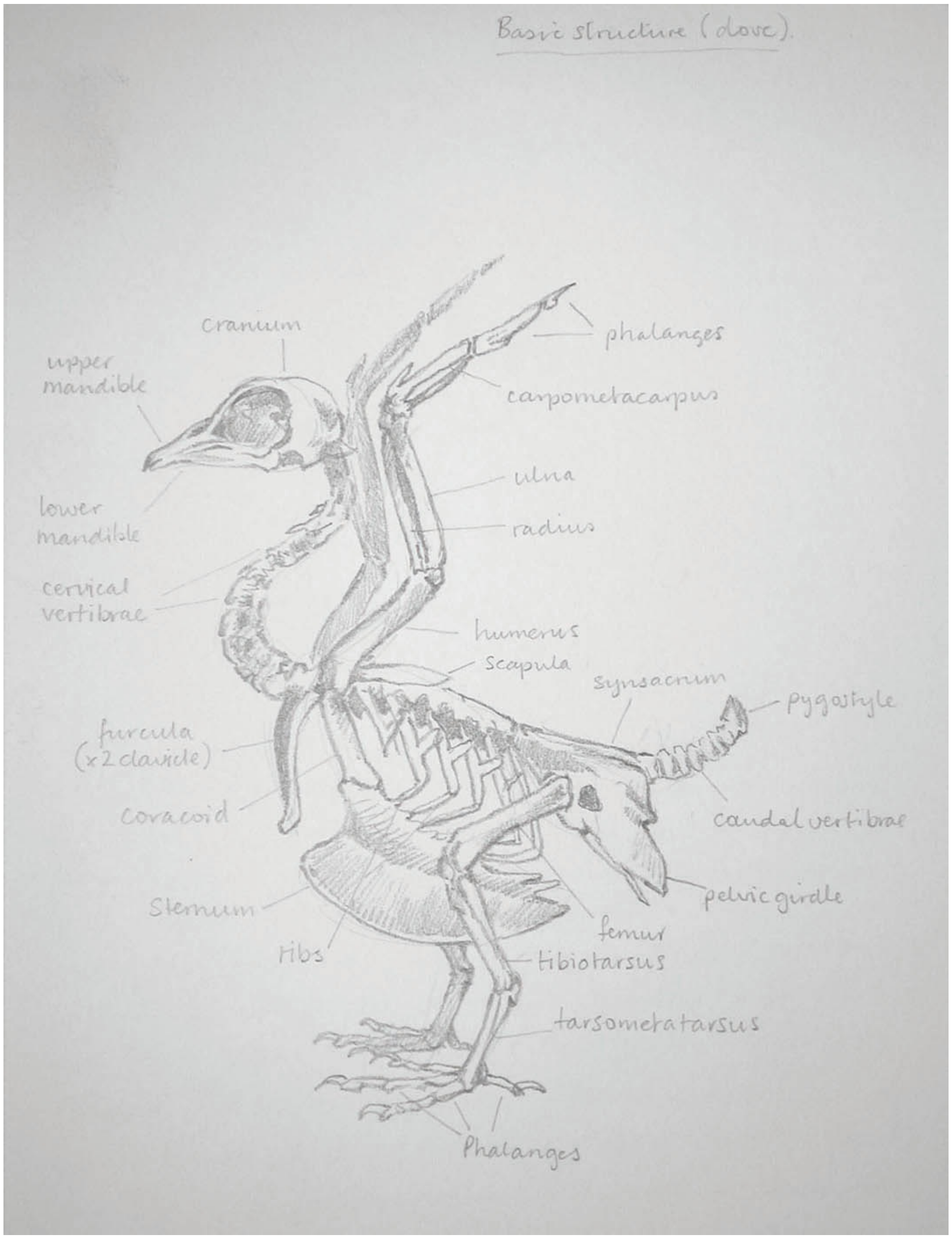
To understand how a bird stands and moves, it is important to get to know at least a little bit about the bird – from inside out, so to speak. In this section we will look at a range of different skeletal adaptations and how these adaptations affect the way the bird looks and moves. There is a huge variety of species and types in the world and a tremendous range of scale too. But birds (generally) share the ability to fly. This is the result of a unique morphology including distinctive skeletal construction, muscle development and feathers.



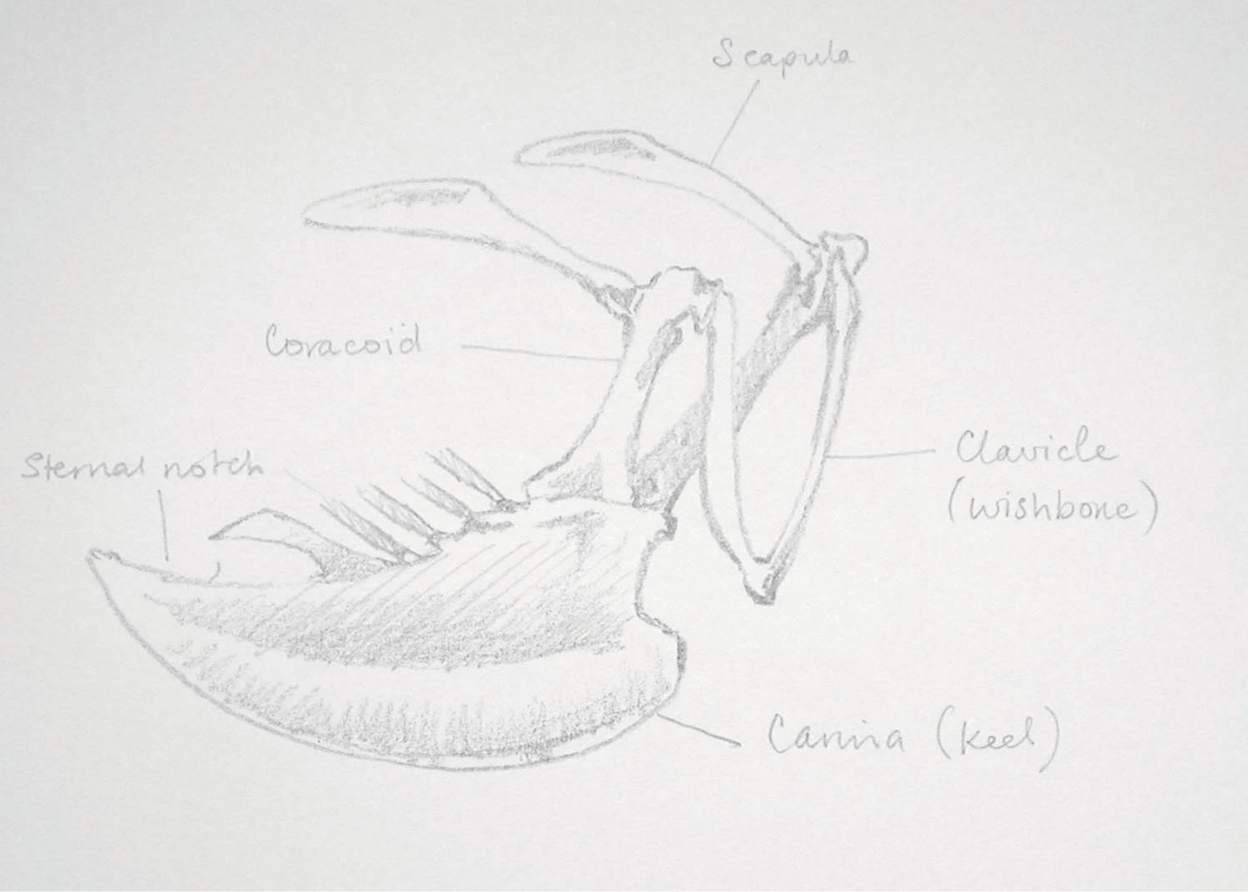
Tim Wootton: common gull post-mortem study.

Birds have developed specifically and uniquely and their primary difference from all other animals is their ability to fly. Special adaptations include extremely lightweight bones. Generally these are hollow and are reinforced with an interior lattice-work, which increases their strength whilst adding very little to their overall weight.

Birds have proportionately large breast muscles which attach to a blade-like extension of the sternum – the keel or breastbone. This arrangement will be familiar to anyone who has carved a chicken at Sunday lunch. These large muscles, however, create great stresses on the skeleton during flight and further mitigating adaptations can be seen. Large sections of the vertebrae (backbone) are fused together for strength. This also means that most birds cannot flex their spines – an important feature when drawing the bird. The collarbones are fused to form the ‘wishbone’ and the ribs have lateral extensions that overlap the subsequent rib. These appendages are known as the uncinate processes and contribute to the overall strength of the thorax.

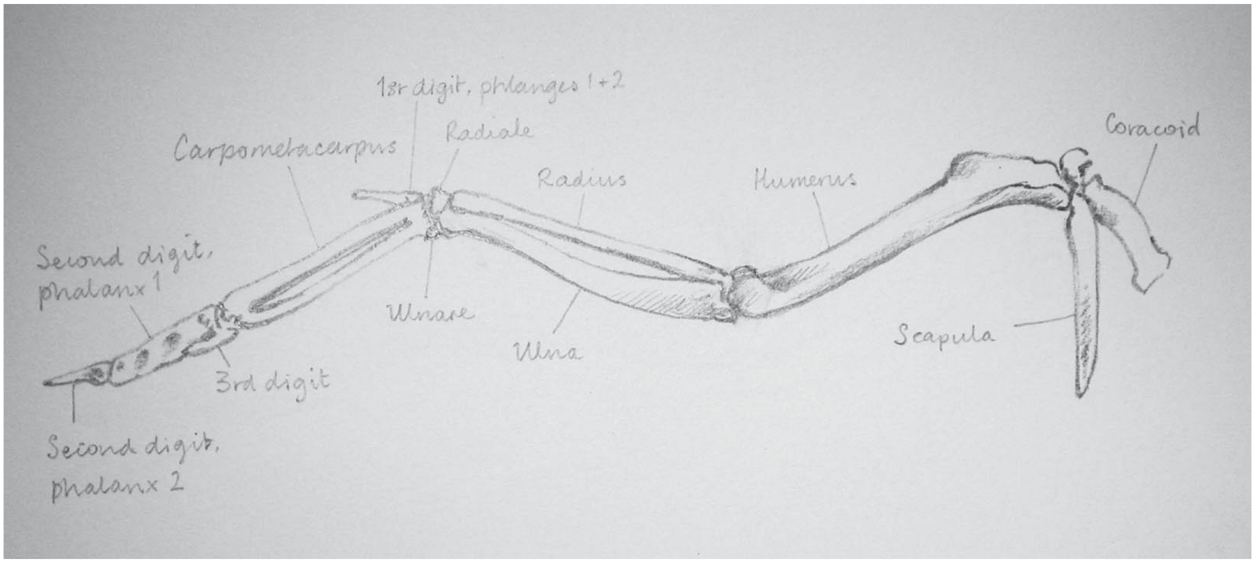

Basic structure (dove).
cranium
upper mandible
lower mandible
cervical vertibrae
phalanges
carpometacarpus
ulna
radius
humerus
Scapula
Synsacrum
pygostyle
furcula (x2 clavicle)
coracoid
caudal vertibrae
Sternum
pelvic girdle
femur
ribs
tibiotarsus
tarsometatarsus
Phalanges

Basic avian skeleton – dove.

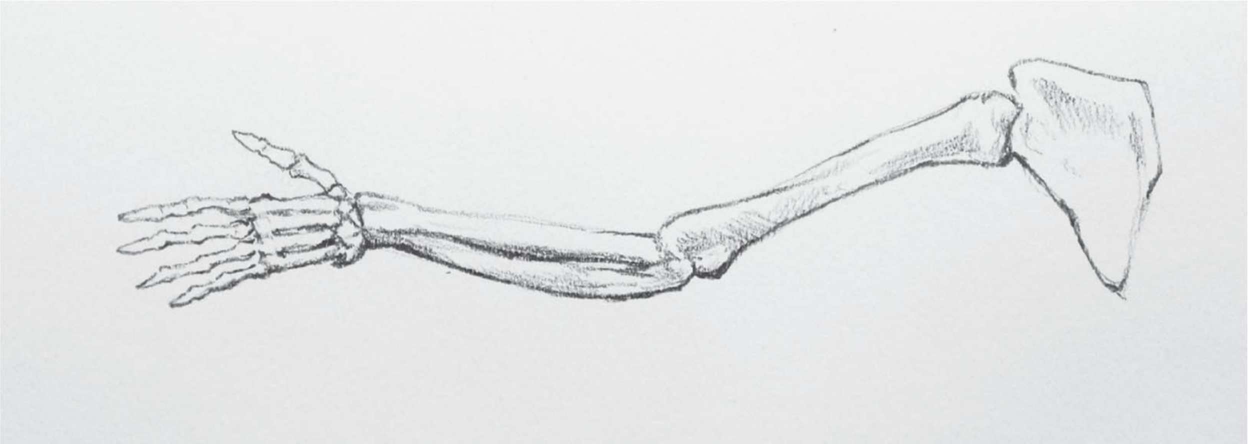


Pectoral girdle and keel structure.

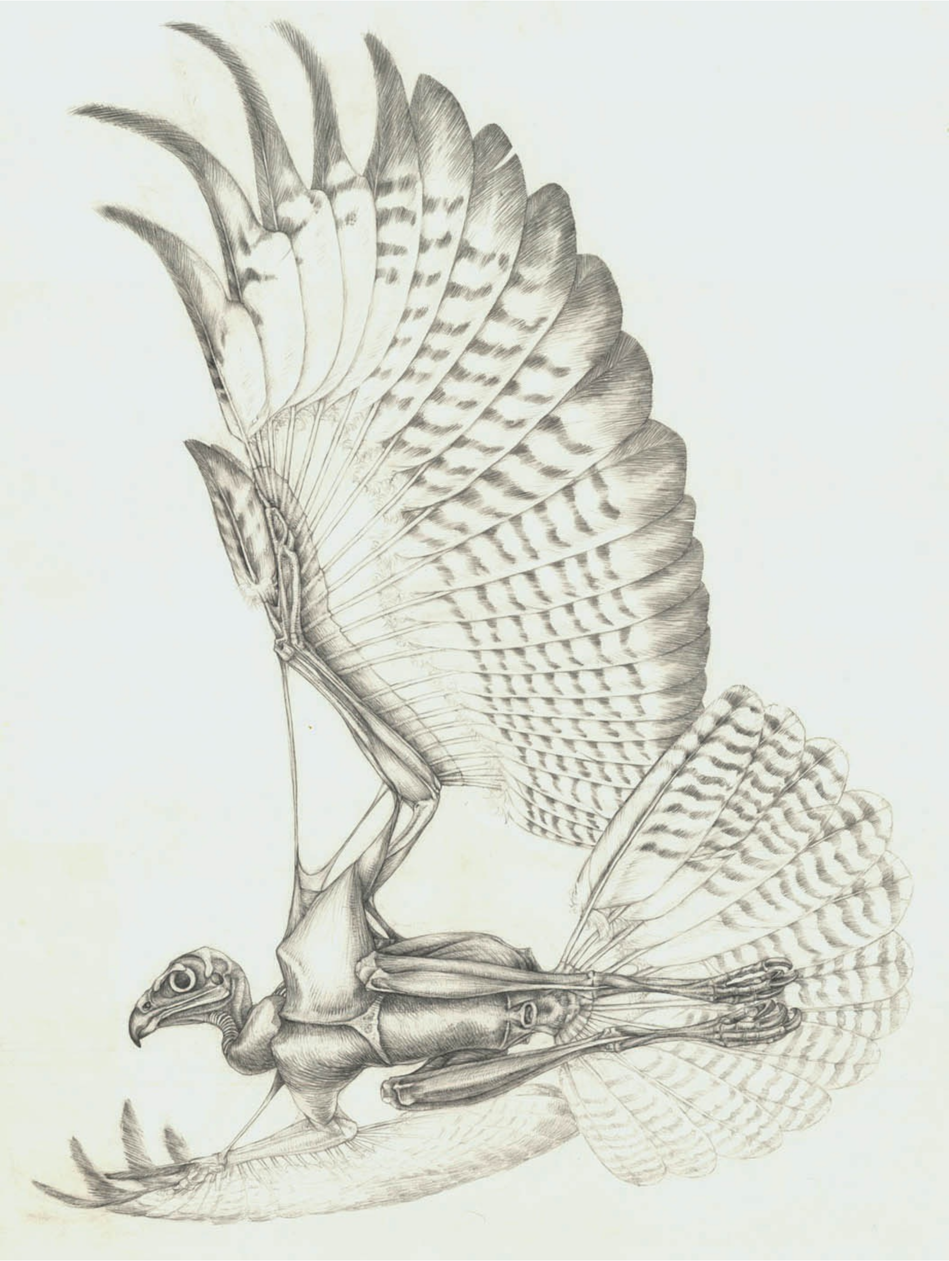
Perhaps the most complex joint structure in the bird’s skeleton is the wrist. It is capable of locking and releasing at given moments during the flapping action and articulates to enable something akin to a figure-of-eight movement. It assists in allowing the bird to perform the most intricate manoeuvres. Unsurprisingly, these bones are highly specialized, although there is a similarity to those of the human hand, even if assembled somewhat differently. As with the leg, the rest of the arm bones bare close similarity with mammal forelimb bones.


1st digit, phlanges 1+2
Carpometacarpus
Radiale
Radius
Humerus
Coracoid
Second digit, phalanx 1
Ulnare
Ulna
Scapula
3rd digit
Second digit, phalanx 2

Typical bird-wing osteology…



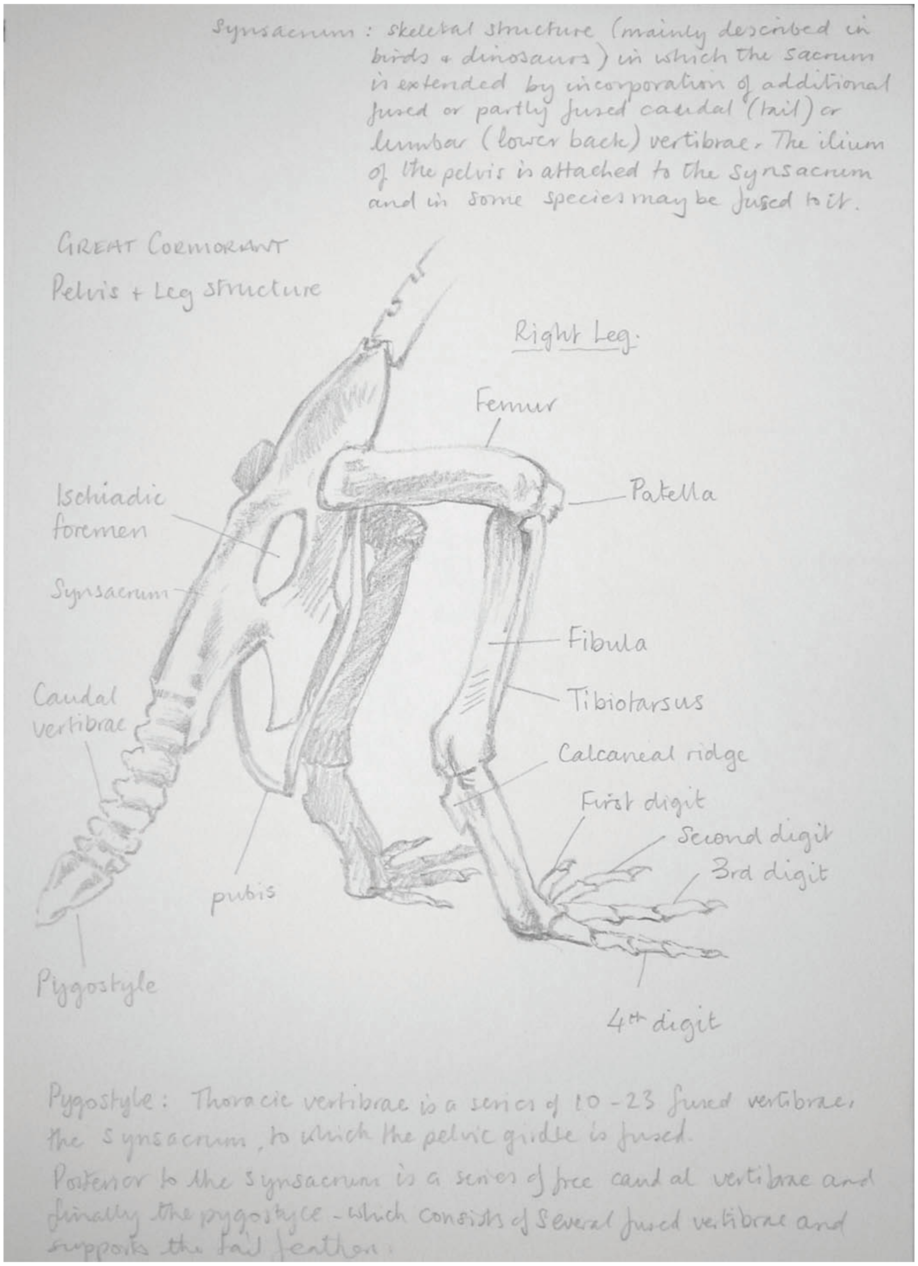
… compared to the human arm.



Katrina van Grouw: buzzard.

However, the bird skeleton has much in common with that of most mammals, including our own. Most of the joints and major bones are similar. What is often confusing is the apparently backwards-bending knee that birds appear to possess. Birds' legs, however, are constructed similarly to our own – but the main knee joint is hidden under belly, flank and wing feathers. The backwards-bending knee is in fact the bird's ankle joint and what we can see of its leg from this point downwards is equivalent to our foot (tarsus). Birds actually stand and walk on their toes.

Birds’ feet also have an anatomical feature unique to them, which enables them to perch on thin branches and even sleep whilst doing so. The tendon arrangements are such that they cause the toes to clench and grip the more the legs flex and relax. The feet can give many clues to the way a bird moves and even how it feeds. In birds of prey and owls, the feet are tools used for catching, holding and killing live food. Typically they have wickedly sharp and curved talons that pierce skin and muscle. Game birds (such as pheasants and grouse) and jungle fowl (or farmyard chicken) have muscular feet and powerful toes with which they scratch the earth to reveal food items such as seeds and invertebrates. The claws are thick and spade-like. Many water birds have long toes that help to spread the weight of the bird, assisting in their manoeuvrability over muddy ground. Jacanas and gallinules can walk over the leaves of floating water plants. Webbed feet enable the bird to push itself through the water efficiently and many different species share this characteristic. Cormorants, pelicans, gannets, auks and ducks are not closely related, but have each evolved this feature.

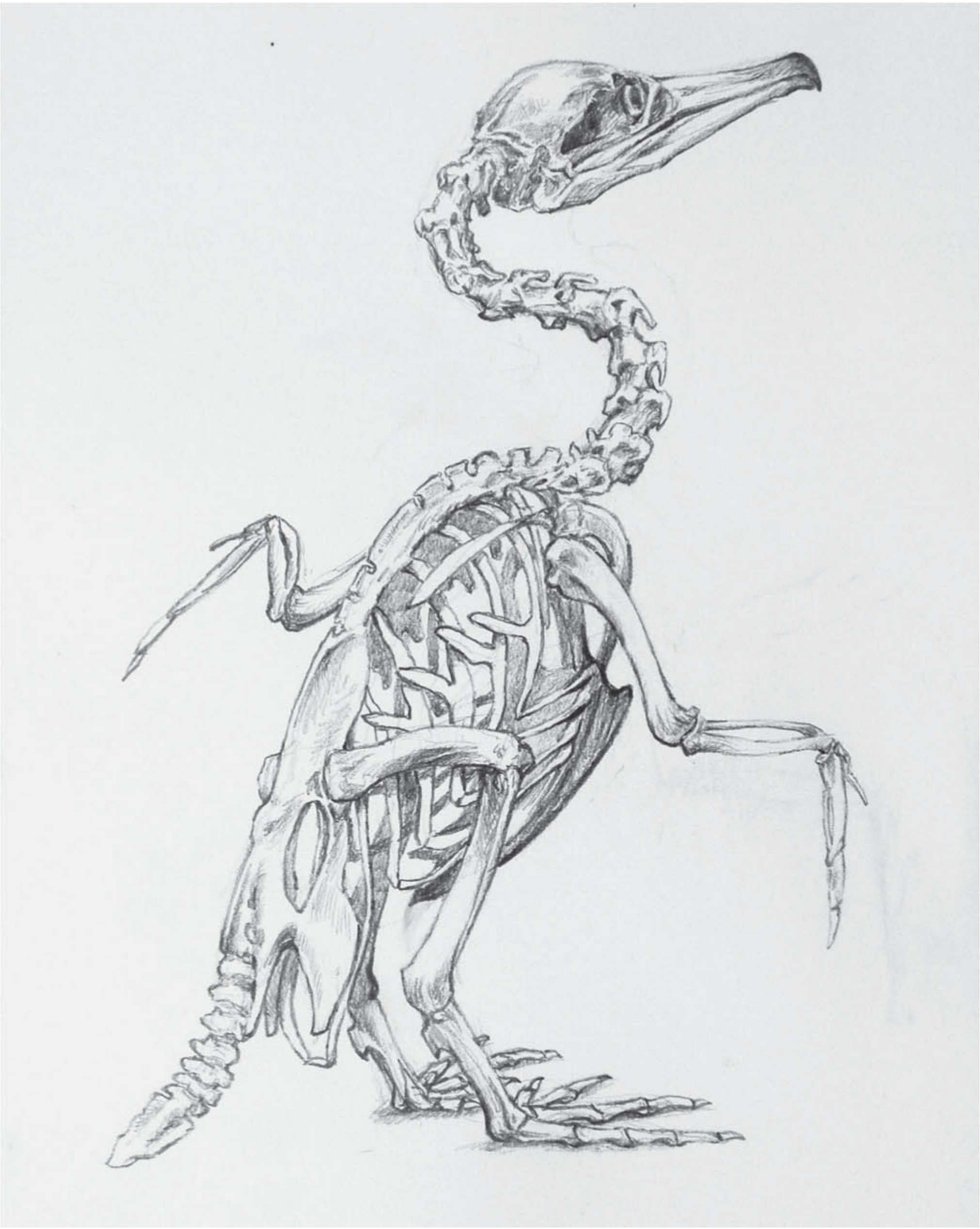

Synsacrum: skeletal structure (mainly described in birds + dinosaurs) in which the sacrum is extended by incorporation of additional fused or partly fused caudal (tail) or lumbar (lower back) vertibrae. The ilium of the pelvis is attached to the synsacrum and in some species may be fused to it.

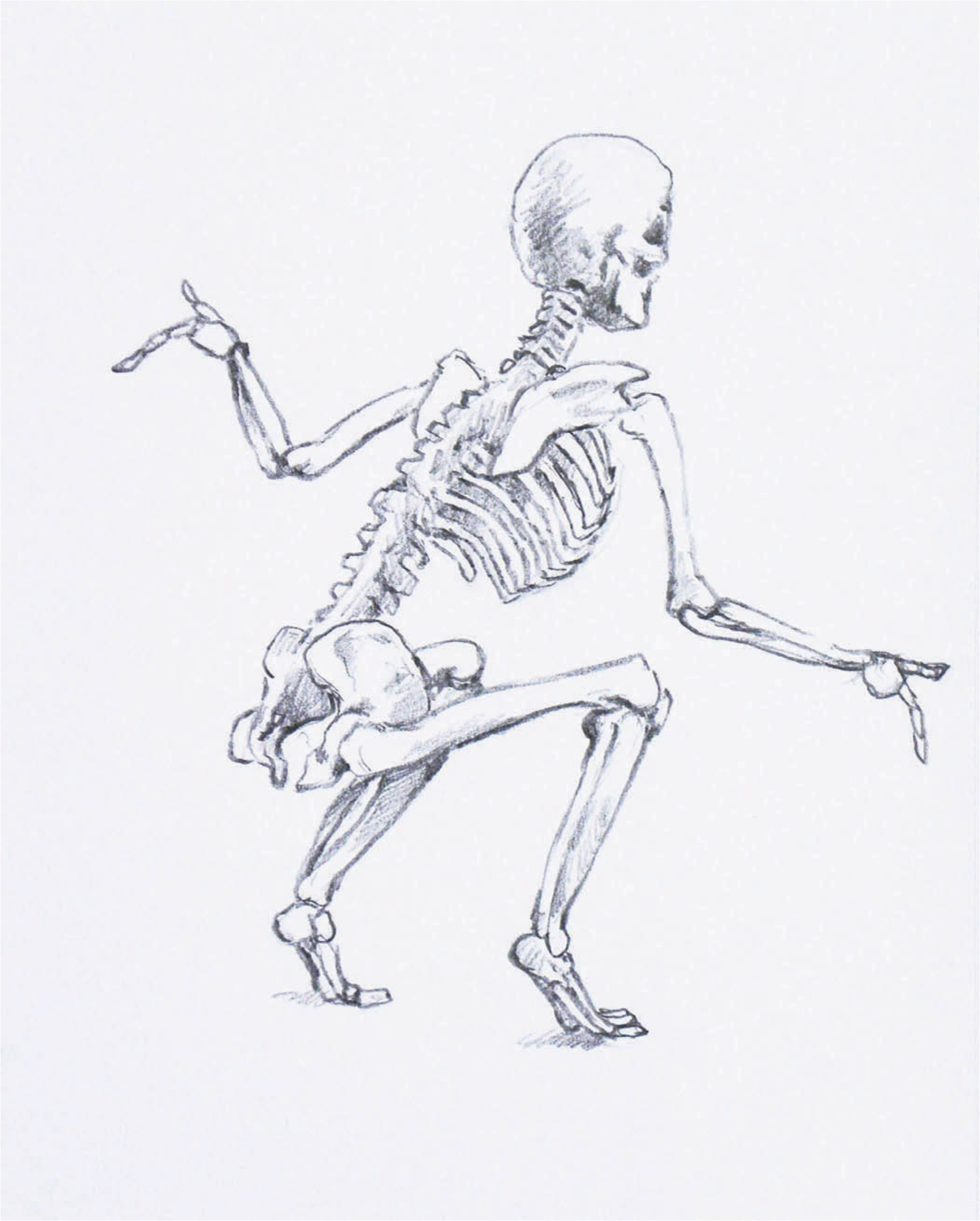
GREAT CORMORANT
Pelvis + Leg structure
Right Leg.
Femur
Patella
Ischiadic foremen
Synsacrum
Fibula
Tibiotarsus
Caudal vertibrae
Calcaneal ridge
First digit
Second digit
3rd digit
pubis
Pygostyle
4th digit

Pygostyle: Thoracic vertibrae is a series of 10-23 fused vertibrae, the synsacrum, to which the pelvic girdle is fused.
Posterior to the synsacrum is a series of free caudal vertibrae and finally the pygostyle - which consists of several fused vertibrae and supports the tail feathers.

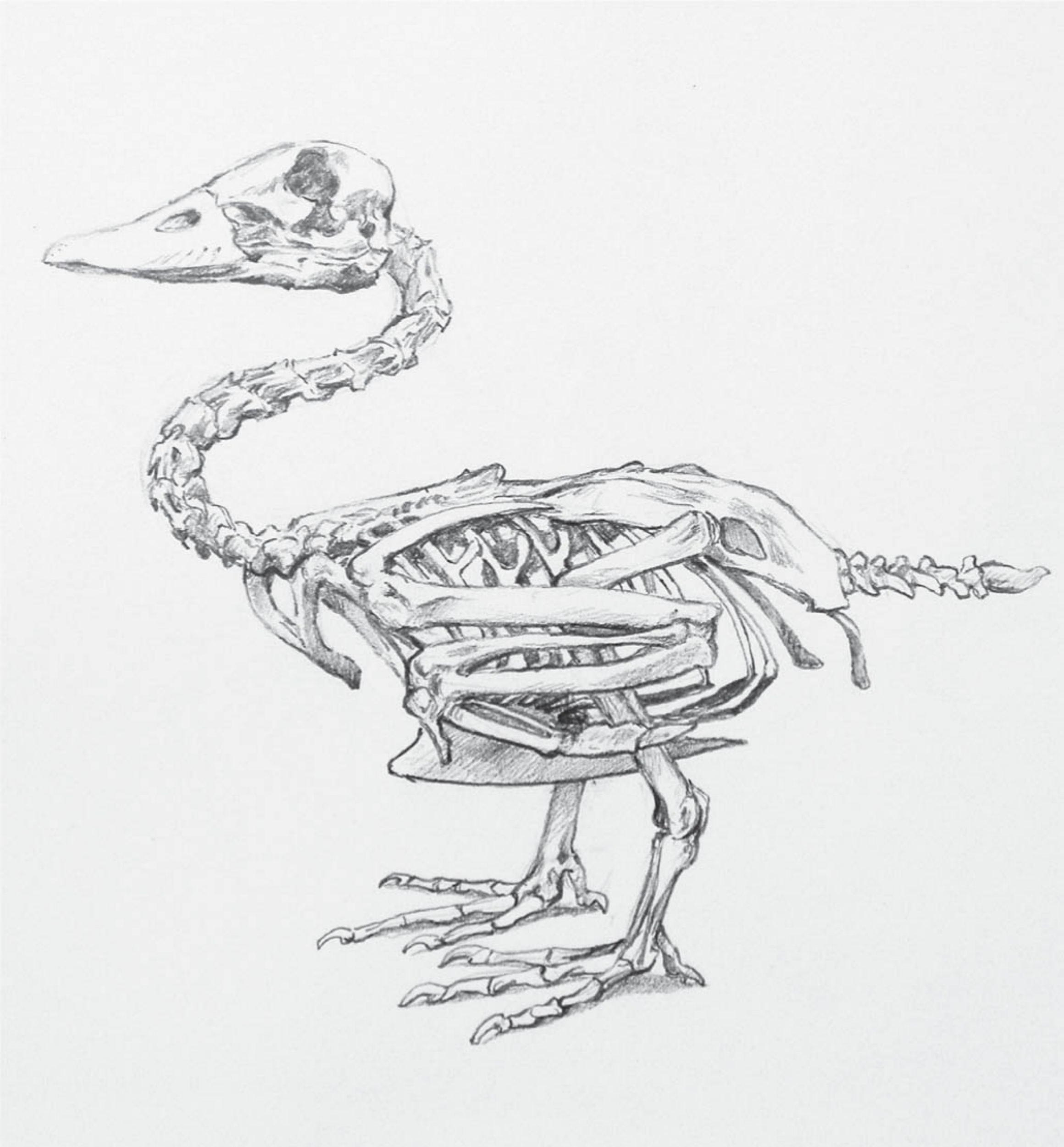
Pelvic, sacrum and leg structure – great cormorant.

The principal musculature of the bird is involved with its primary function: flight. The pectoral (breast) muscles are large and powerful, which is necessary for flight. The main stroke for powered flight comes from a downwards and slightly backwards movement of the wings. Clearly this creates huge opposing forces against the air as the bird’s wings are brought down through it, lifting the bird in the air. The lifting of the wings is done not by muscles on the bird’s back, but by muscles that are also attached to the sternum (keel). These muscles (supra-coracoideus) curve around to attach to the top of the humerus. When they contract they operate in a pulley-like fashion, raising and slightly rotating the wing. These muscle groups are proportionately very large and can form up to 35 per cent of the total weight of the creature. The way these muscles work is very complex and gives rise to the enormous variability in species flight and in directional movement.





Compare the drawings of the cormorant skeleton and that of the human.



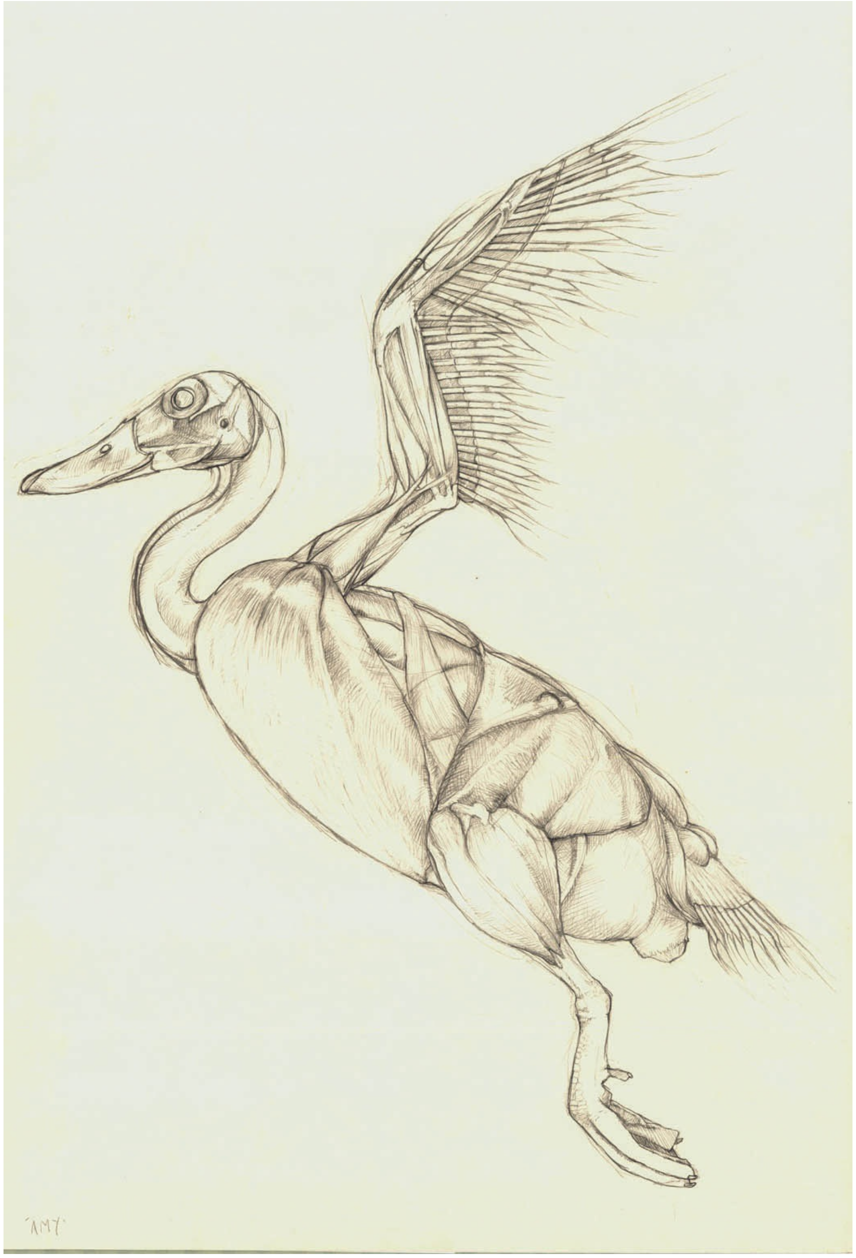
Tim Wootton: skeleton of a duck.

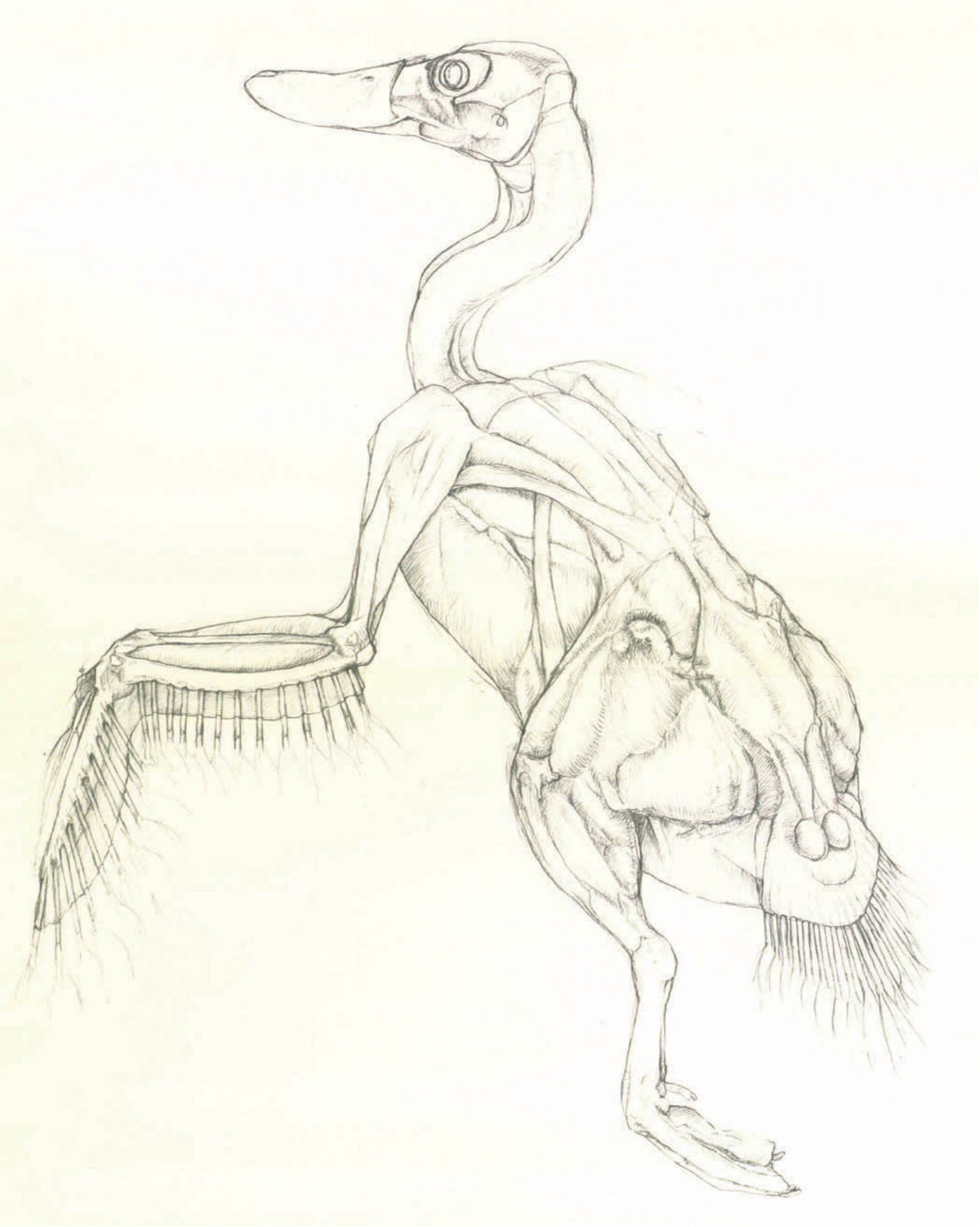
The way the muscles operate can best be seen in birds that hover, in birds coming in to land on a perch, and in stalling flight around sea cliffs.

Getting to know the general anatomy of birds is an essential part of their portrayal. Learning about the specific anatomical variations from one species to the next will help greatly in the depiction of that singular species. For instance many pelagic (ocean-going) birds have similar adaptations regarding their ability to cruise enormous distances by using the air pockets and thrusts formed by the swell of the ocean. Gulls and petrels look superficially quite similar in appearance, but are taxonomically quite unrelated.

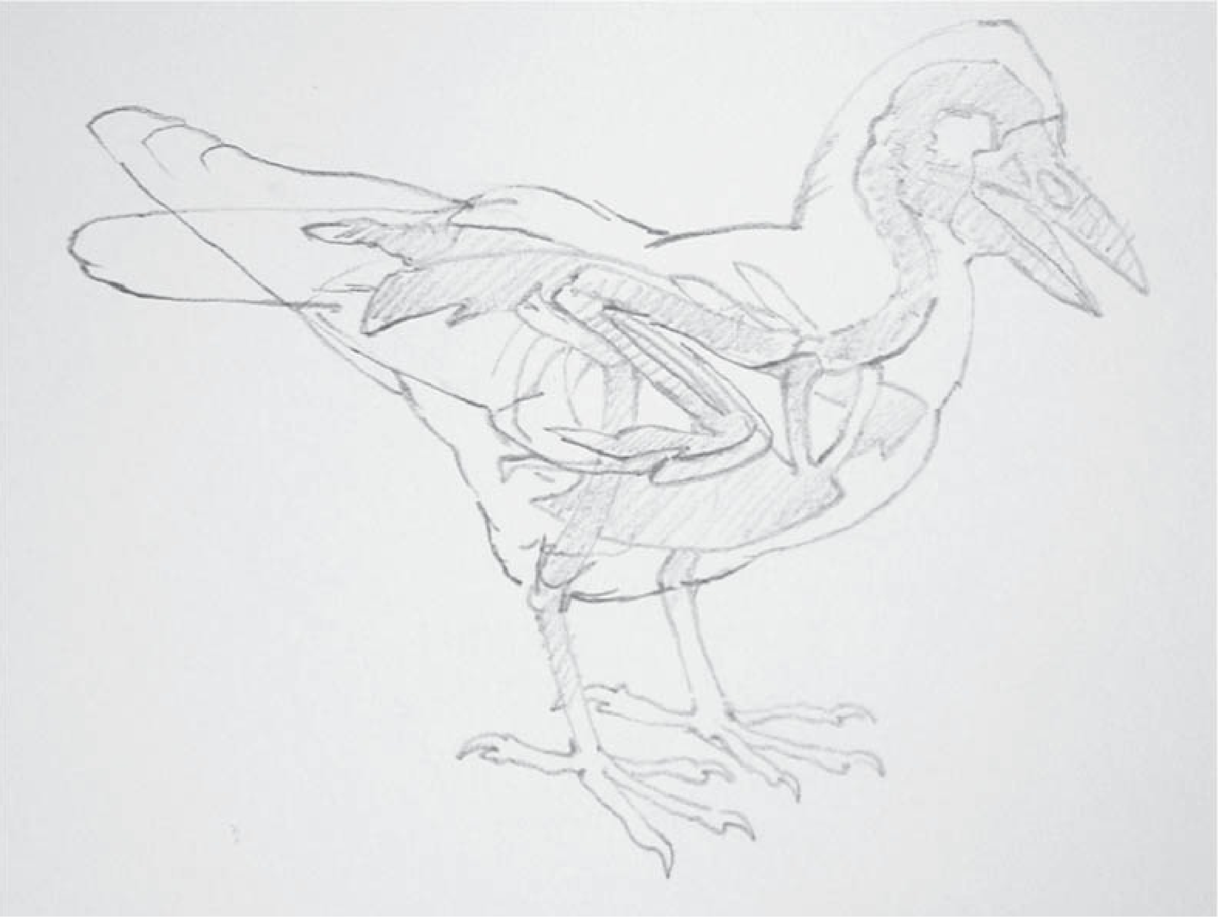
Fulmars are members of the petrel family: true masters of the marine environment. They are able to cruise huge distances seemingly effortlessly by holding their wings stiffly. Their bodies are robust, rounded in section and strongly tapered at either end; it would be difficult to design a more streamlined form.

Another aspect of fulmar flight can be seen at their breeding sites, namely sea cliffs. They use their feet as rudders, brakes and stabilizers in the turbulent air around the cliffs. Usually the feet are tucked under the bird’s tail and are lowered when required to perform the functions mentioned above. This enables close control and manoeuvrability in the air, but in extreme conditions and when the bird is soaring through the air, the fulmar tucks its feet up in the forward position, nestling under the abdomen. Here they are secreted under the thick body feathers and are all but invisible. Perhaps the forward position brings more weight to the bird’s centre of gravity allowing for a more dynamic style of flight. When the bird is seen in this mode it could be very easy to think that the bird had lost its legs.

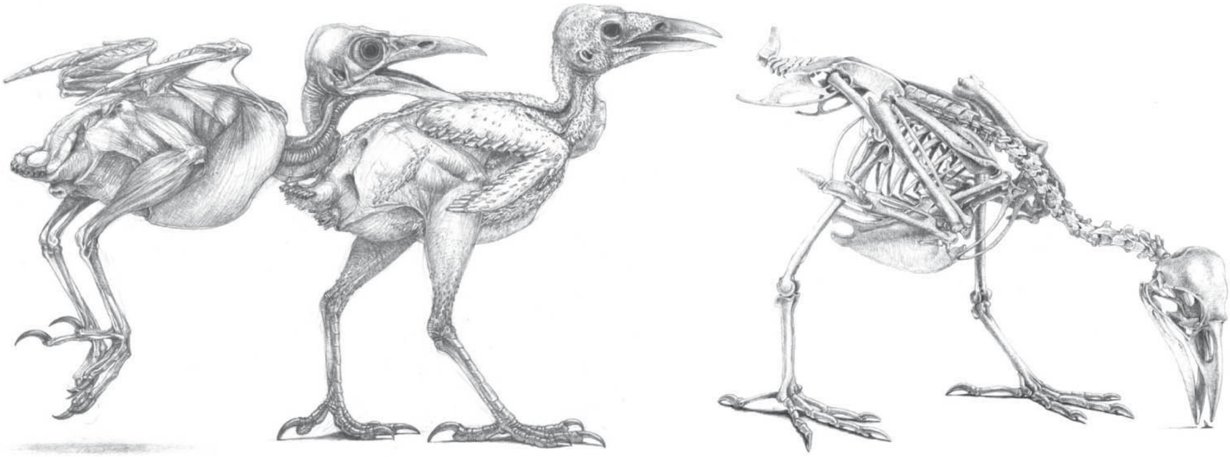

'AMY'



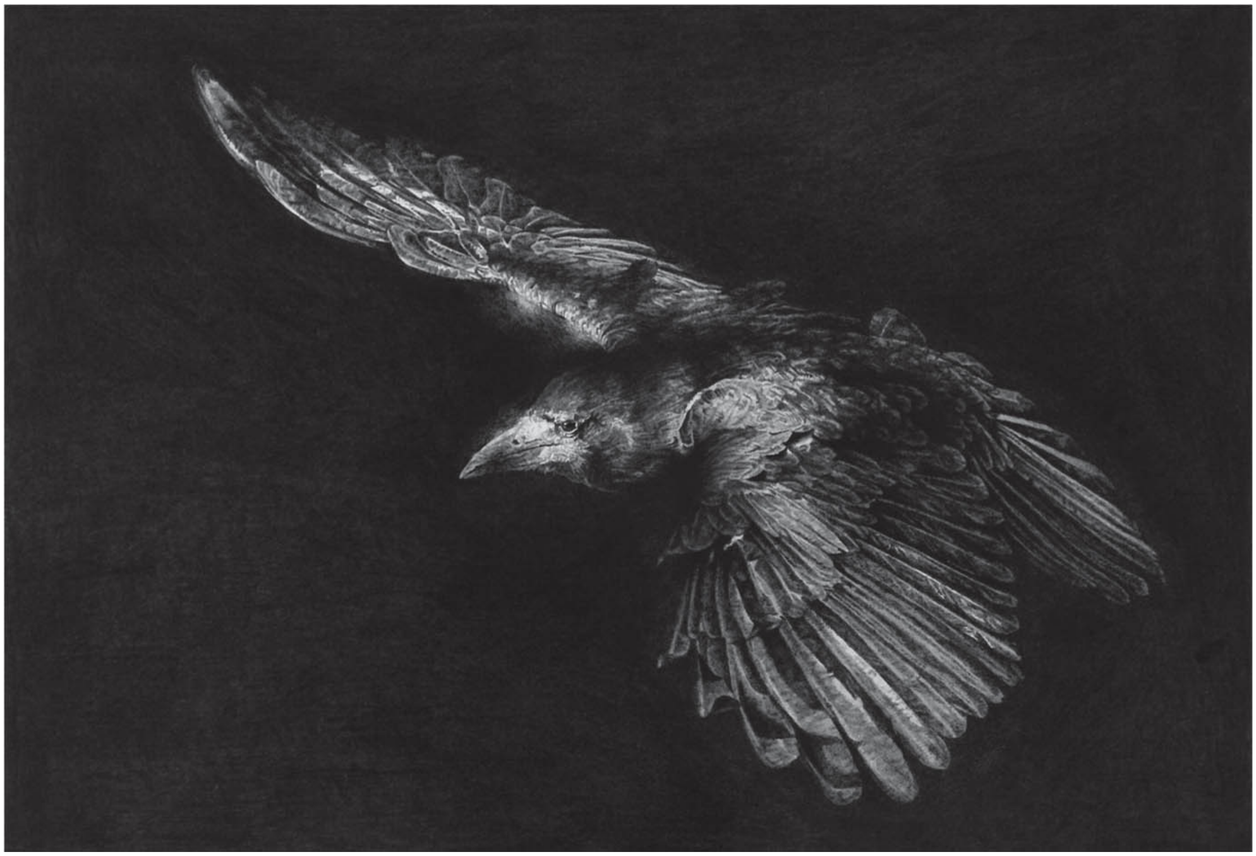
Katrina van Grouw: intricate and detailed studies of mallard musculature, side and back views. Investigative and exploratory work such as this connects science with art.



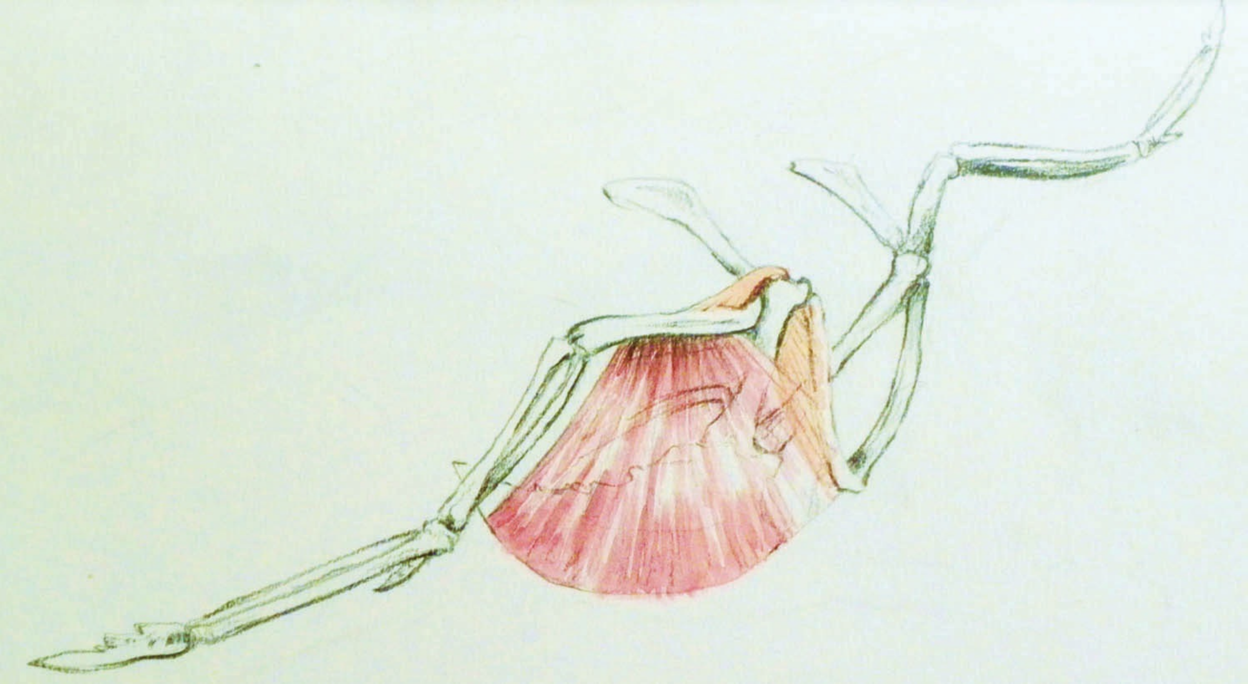
Tim Wootton: rook osteology.



Katrina van Grouw: rooks showing musculature, feather tracts and skeleton (pencil drawing).

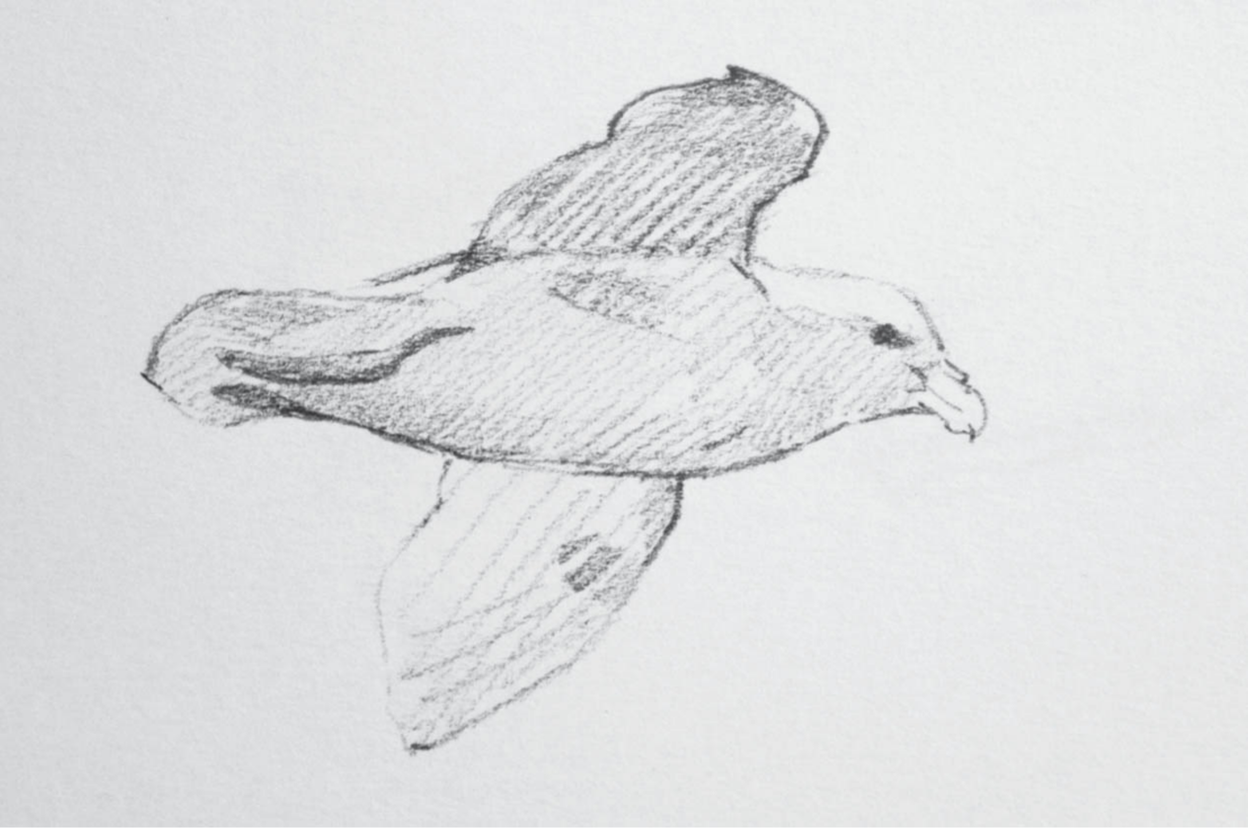


Angela French: rook (graphite drawing).



Pectoral and supracoracoid muscles (wings, sternum and wishbone

Pectoral and supracoracoid muscles (wings, sternum and wishbone arrangement).



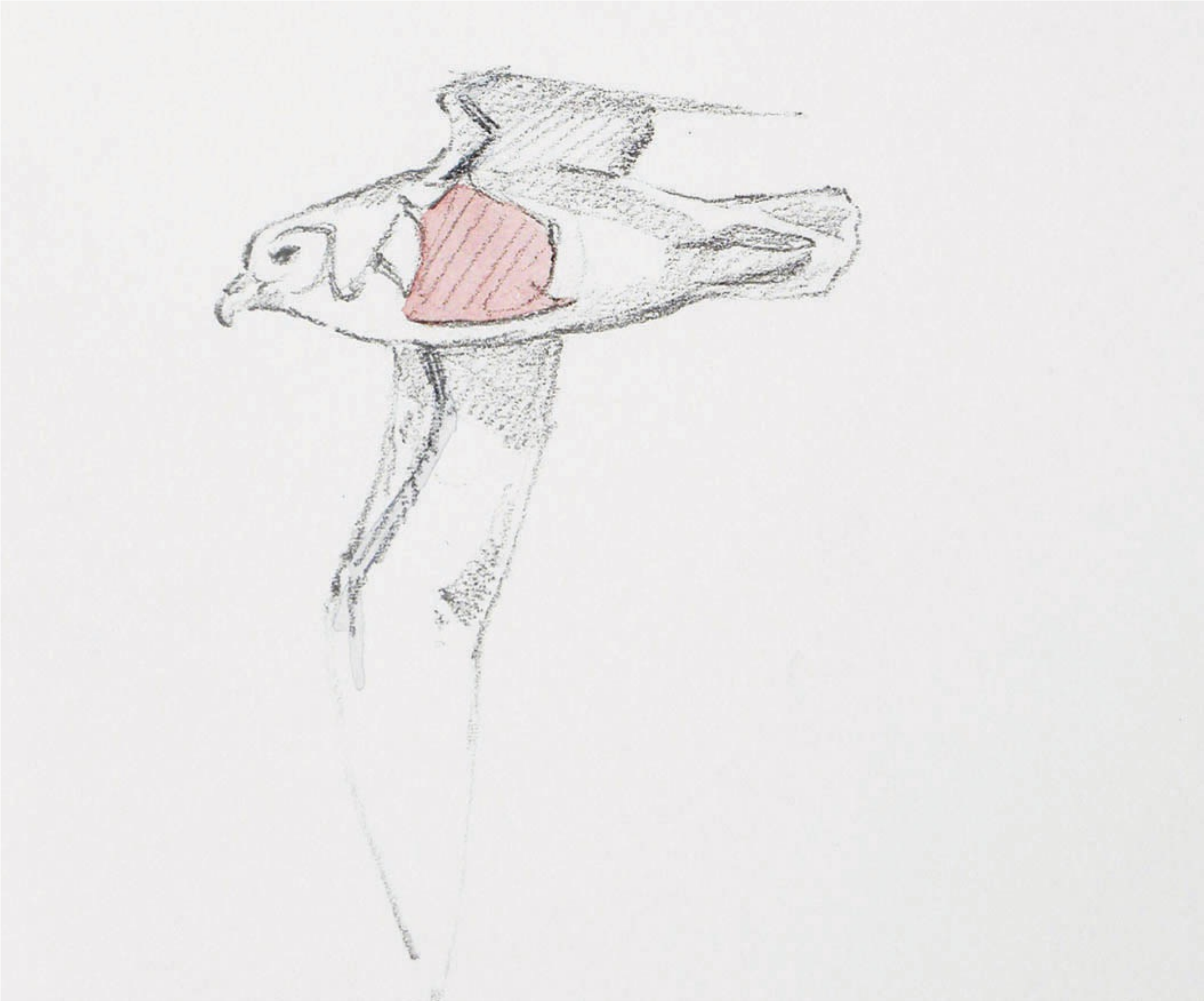
Tim Wootton: fulmar.

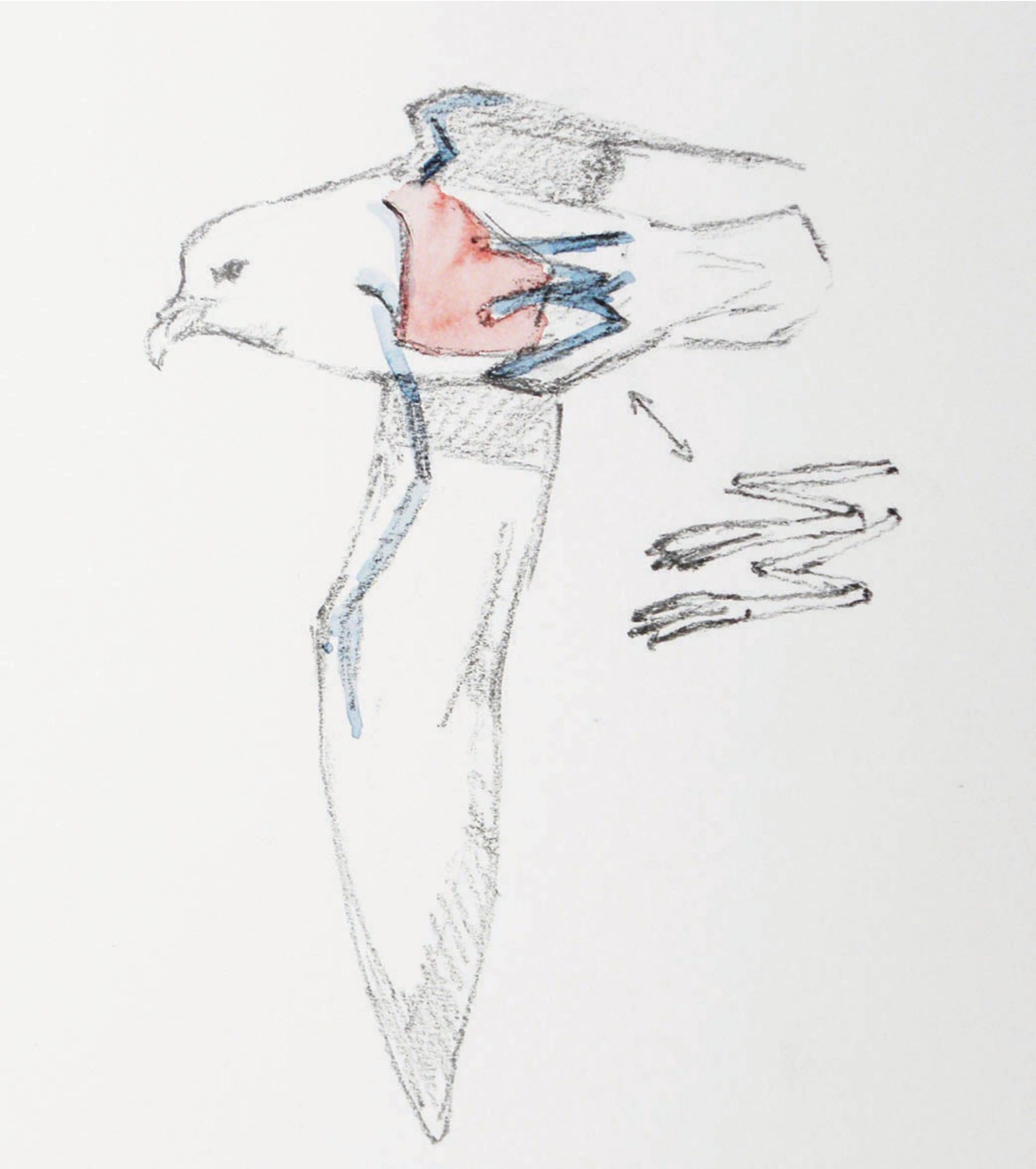
Fulmars, like other members of the petrel family, spend much of their time at sea. They are opportunistic feeders on morsels floating on the surface. Their feeding techniques include pattering their feet in the water whilst they keep themselves stable near the food item with their wings. When they take off from the water they run along the surface for a few steps before becoming airborne. They also paddle when they are gliding close to the water at speed to keep themselves from ditching in the sea (much as a speedway rider will put down a foot on tight bends). This adaptation makes the bird ideally suited to its marine environment, but it also means they are quite cumbersome on land and have difficulty taking off from flat ground. This is one of the reasons they nest on cliffs: they can simply launch into mid air from a standing start.

Knowledge of the bird’s anatomy combined with an understanding of its habitat is important in capturing the essence of the creature.

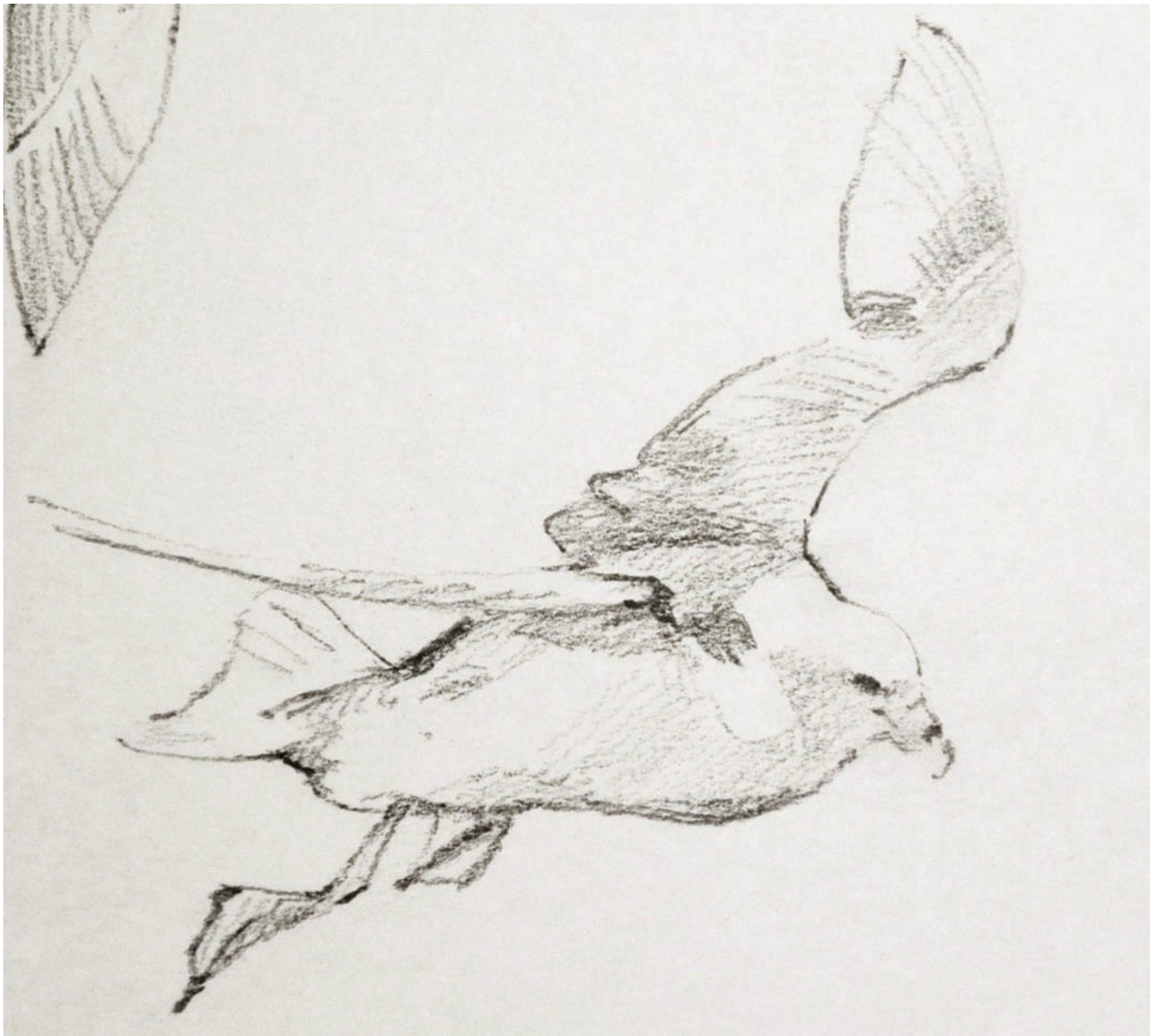
In large birds, leg muscles are well developed. The large flightless species apart, eagles in particular have extraordinarily strong leg muscles not only to support their bodyweight, but to perform their primary function – hunting. Eagles take all manner of prey including fish, mammals and birds. The strength to both catch and then subdue the prey is vital for the bird’s survival.

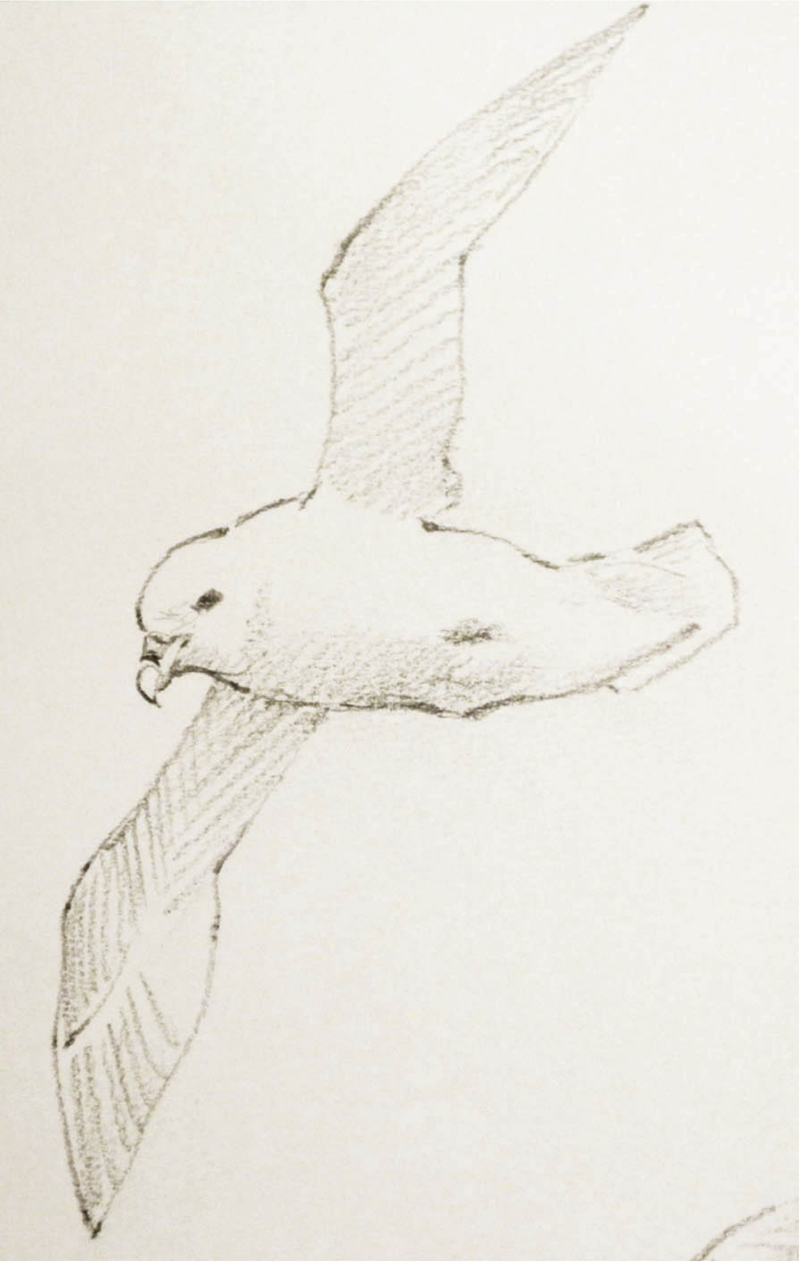
The intricate muscle anatomy is covered with feathers and is therefore rendered invisible. In addition to the main ‘structural’ muscles, each individual feather has a collection of muscles by which the feathers can be raised and lowered. This action, although individual in act, usually affects a regime of feathers simultaneously – the feather groups assembled over the body. It is the arrangement of these groups, and the relative status of them, which actually gives rise to the perceived form of the bird. Therefore, paradoxically, the general structure of the bird is determined not by the massive pectoral (flight) and thigh muscles, but the thousands of tiny follicle muscles that control the status and appearance of the feather masses. This arrangement also accounts for the way a bird can alter its shape and posture at the flick of a switch.



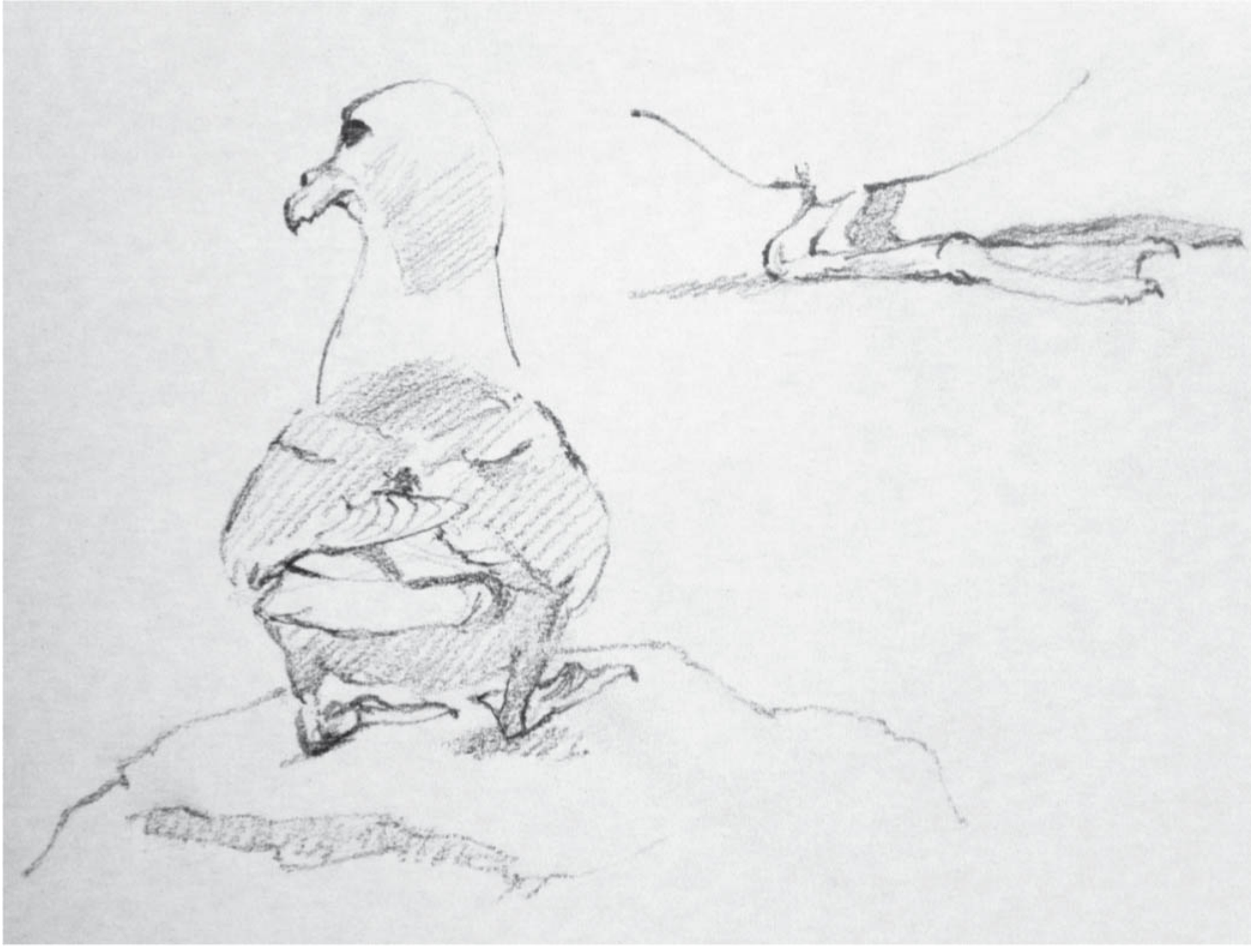


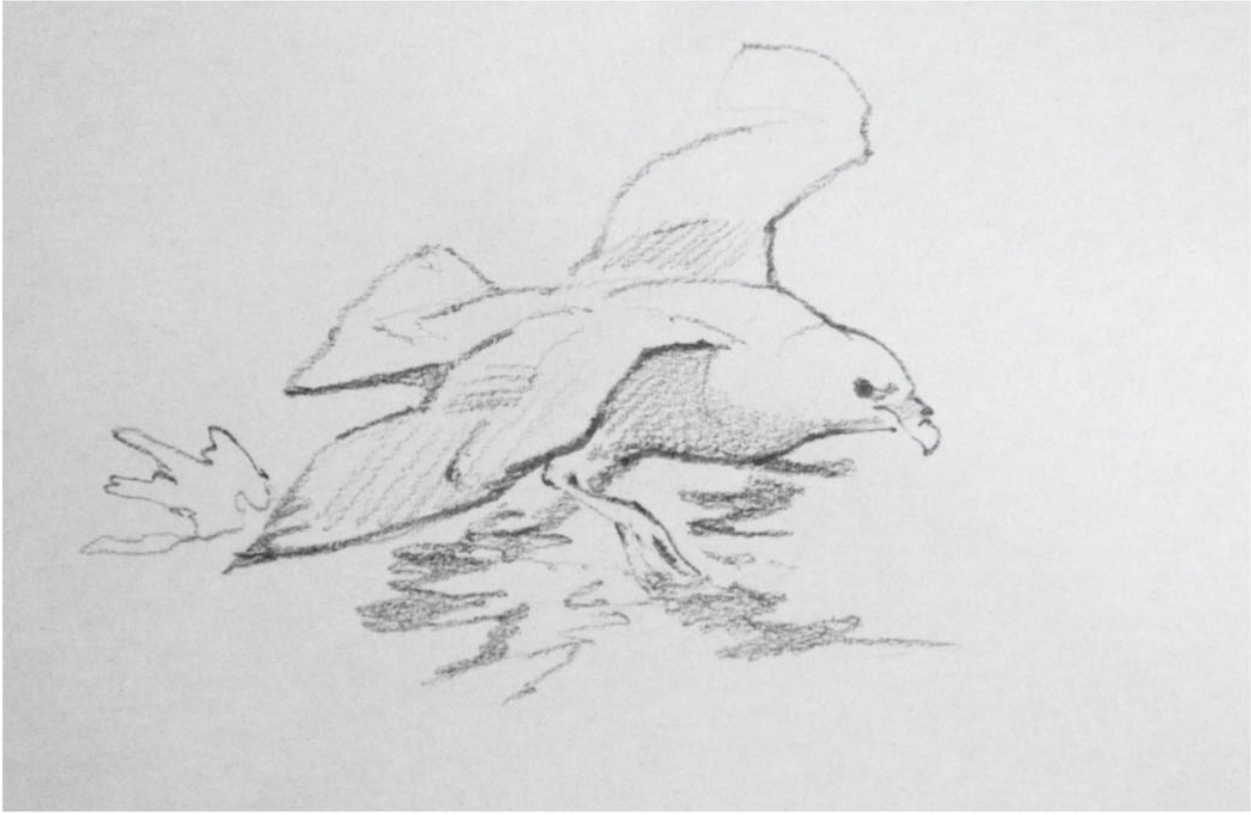
Fulmar showing position of pectoral muscles and, secondly, massing of weight directly under wings when holding legs in forward position.

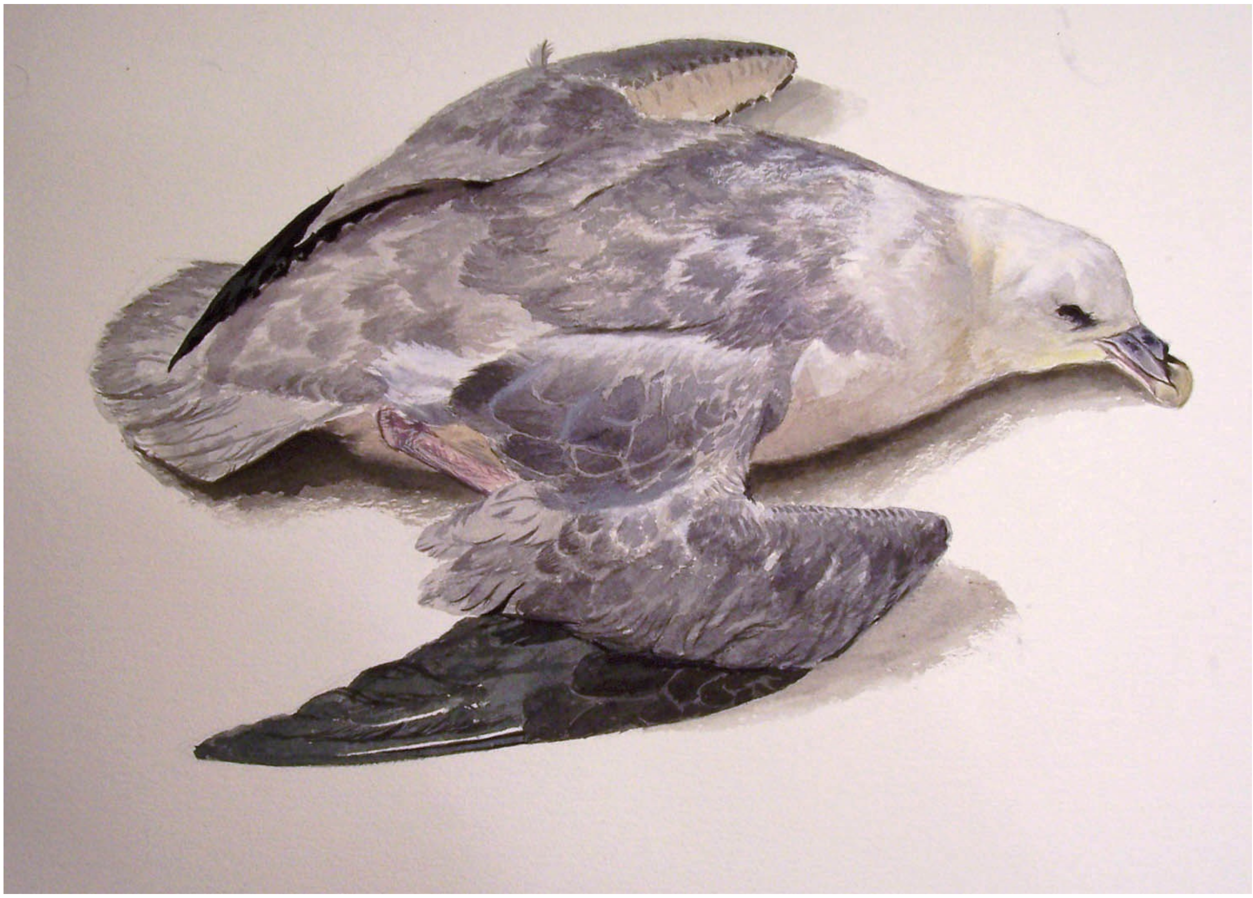




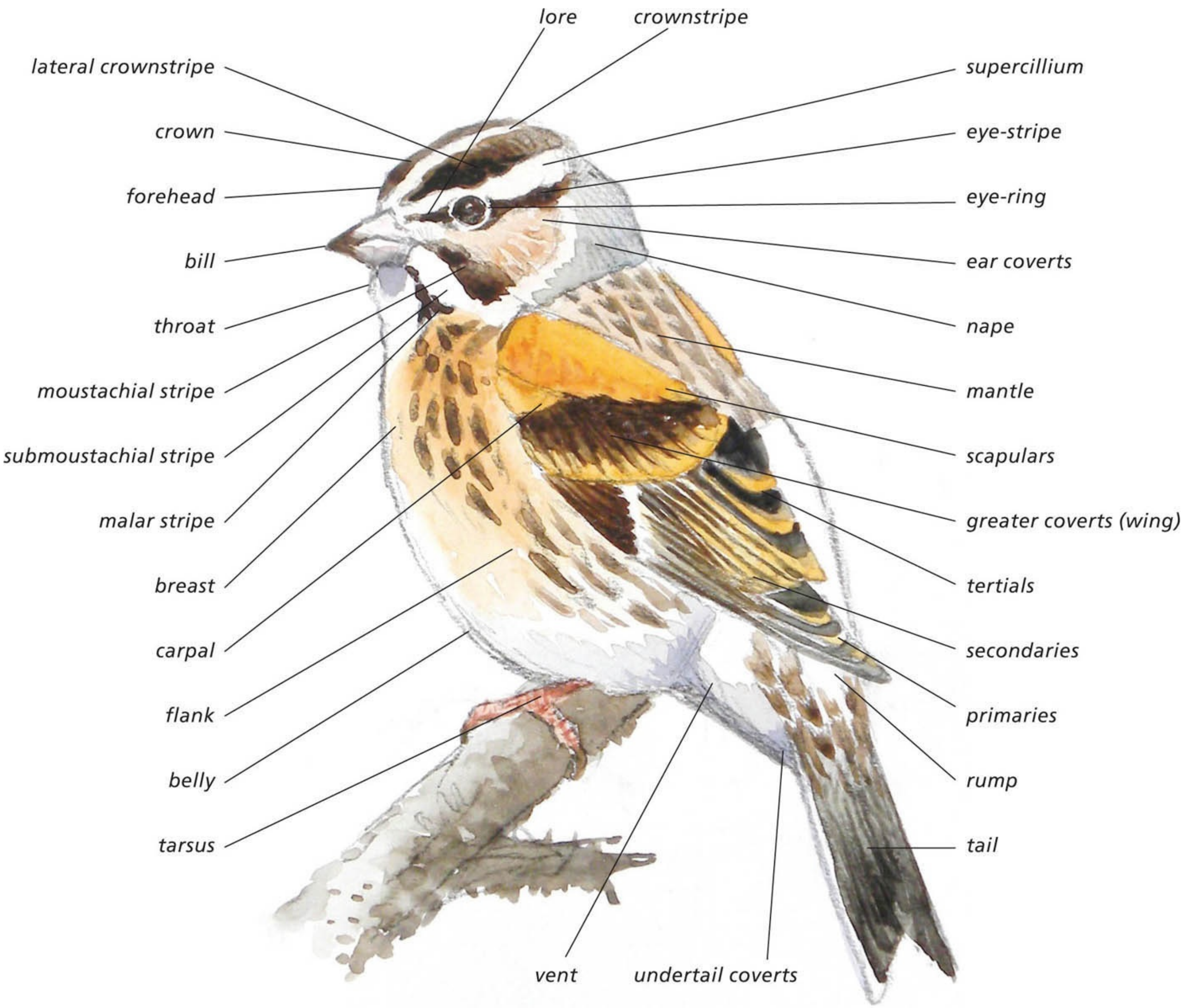
Tim Wootton: fulmar studies.







Tim Wootton: dead fulmar. This post mortem watercolour painting shows the barrel-shaped body and narrow wings typical of the species; note the arrangement of the tubular nostrils, giving rise to the family name of 'tube-noses' given to albatrosses, shearwaters and petrels.


lore
crownstripe
lateral crownstripe
crown
forehead
bill
throat
moustachial stripe
submoustachial stripe
malar stripe
breast
carpal
flank
belly
tarsus
supercillium
eye-stripe
eye-ring
ear coverts
nape
mantle
scapulars
greater coverts (wing)
tertials
secondaries
primaries
rump
tail
vent
undertail coverts

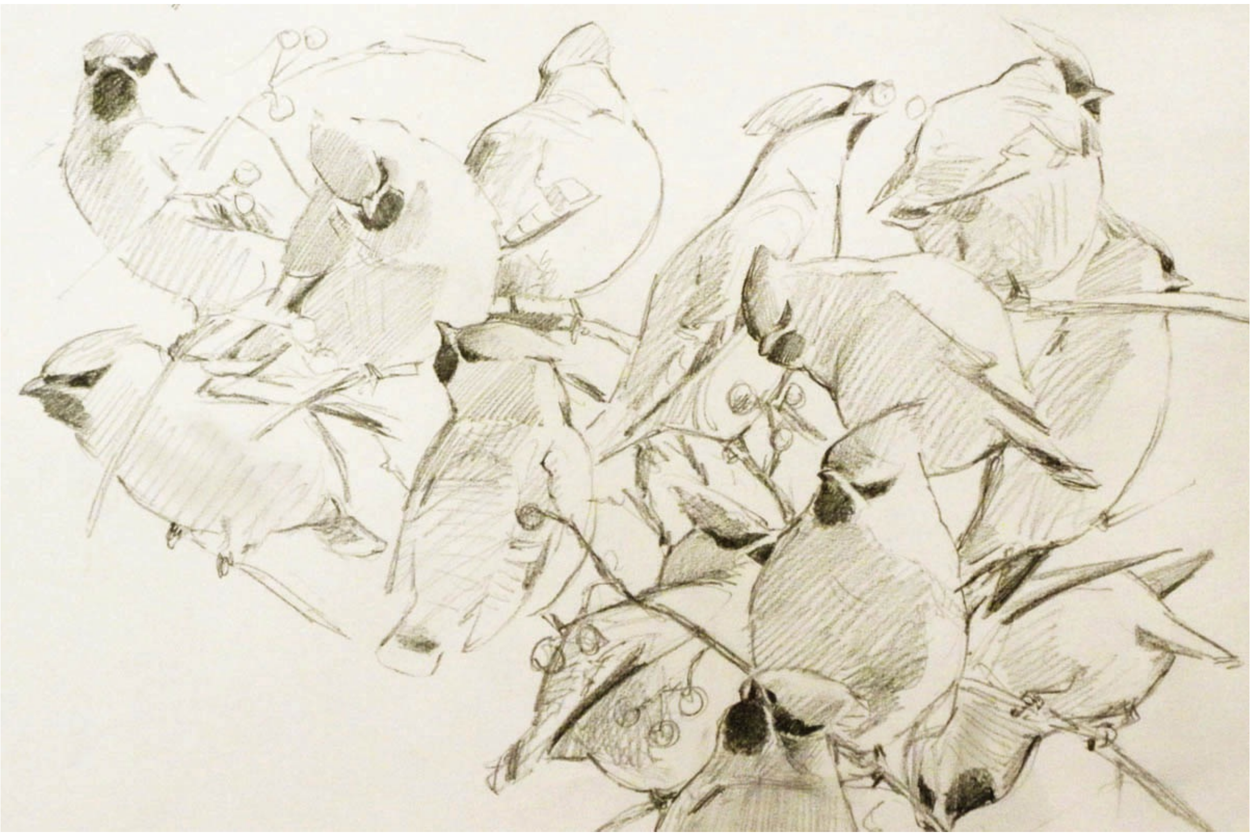
The topography of a bird.

FEATHERS

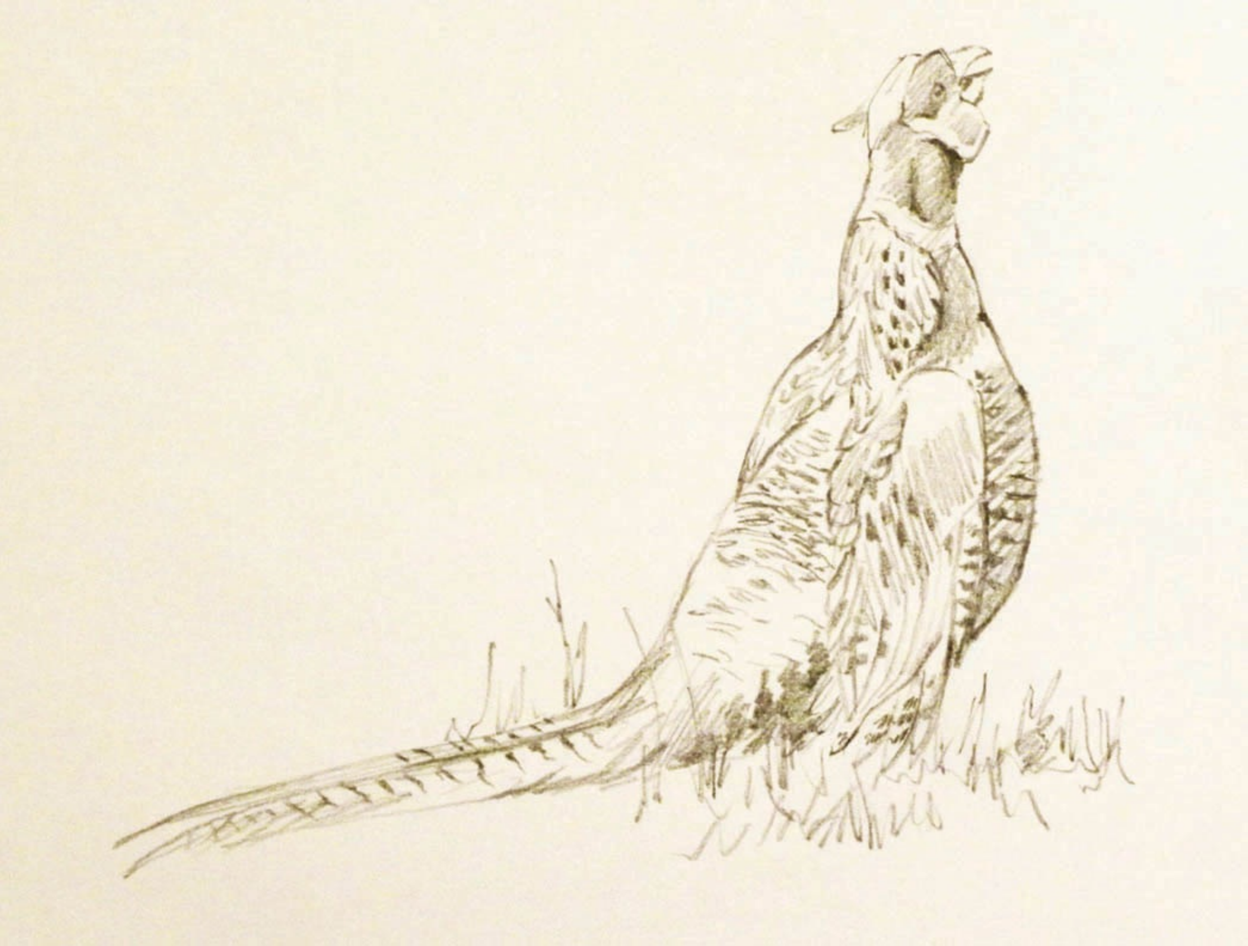
Feathers are a feature unique to birds. There are different types of feathers which perform various functions. Birds have an insulating layer of soft, fluffy feathers called ‘down’ feathers. These are covered by profile feathers but may occasionally be seen when the bird’s plumage is lifted in breezy weather. There are feathers that enable the bird to fly; primary and secondary flight feathers on the wings are augmented by wing-covert feathers. Tail feathers assist in the control and steering of the bird in the air and balance the bird when perching or running. Feathers on the top of the head (crests) can be raised in display or agitation. The appearance of a bird can alter rapidly when it puffs out its feathers.

A bird’s plumage consists of many individual feathers, arranged into groups that have specialized and specific functions. Unlike mammals, which are generally uniformly covered in hair, a bird’s feathers grow in specific lines and groups called feather tracts. In between the tracts are bare areas of flesh. The groups can usually be quite readily seen, particularly on a preening bird.

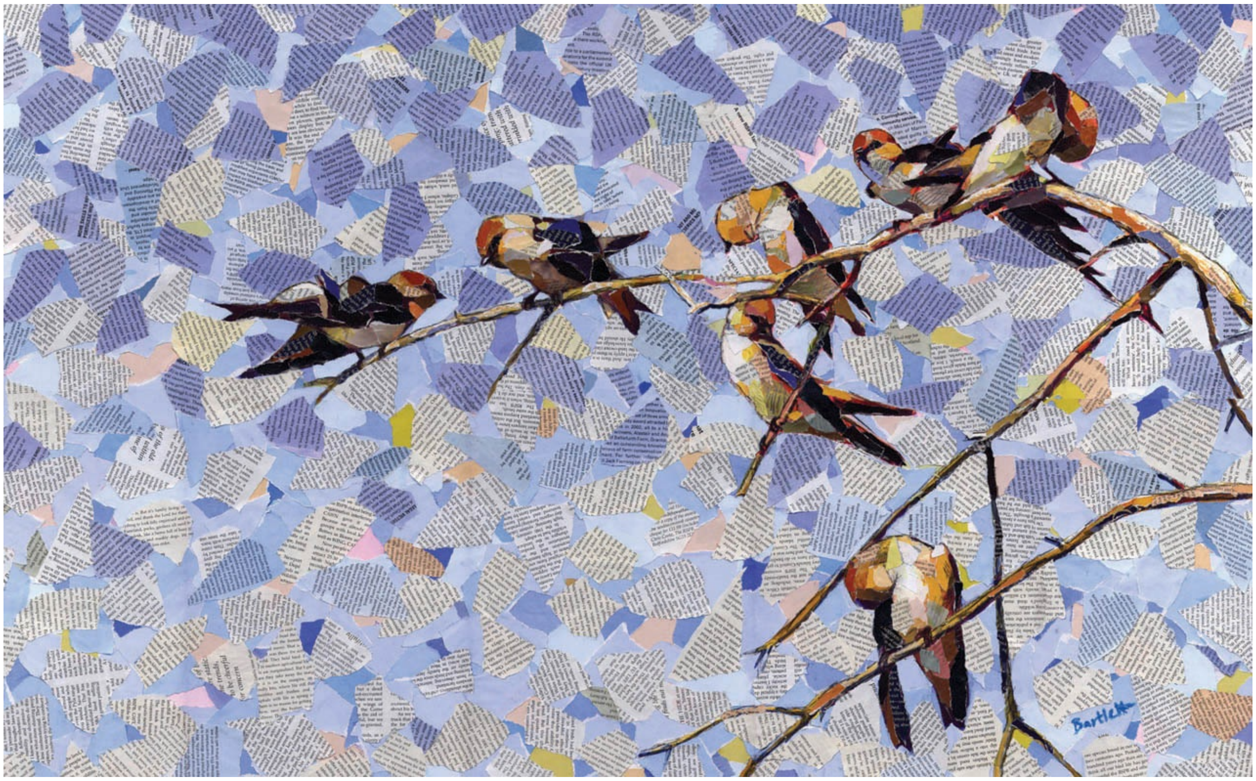
A bird preens its feathers to keep them in tip-top condition. Feathers are constantly under stress from wear and tear and periodically are dropped and replaced in a process known as moulting. Generally in adult birds this is done once a year after the birds’ breeding season and in readiness for the onset of winter. In some birds, the process of moulting flight feathers is done gradually and individually so enough are retained at any one time to enable the bird to keep on the wing. In some cases huge gaps are visible in the flying bird – waders, gulls and crows can look extremely scruffy at certain times of year, and watching their rapid wing beats it’s amazing they can keep airborne at all. Some species lose all their flight feathers at the same time – ducks in particular. Certain species go on special ‘moult migrations’ and congregate at historically favoured areas where they lose the ability to fly and only return ‘home’ after the whole process of moulting is complete.



Tim Wootton: waxwings – feeding shape-shifters.

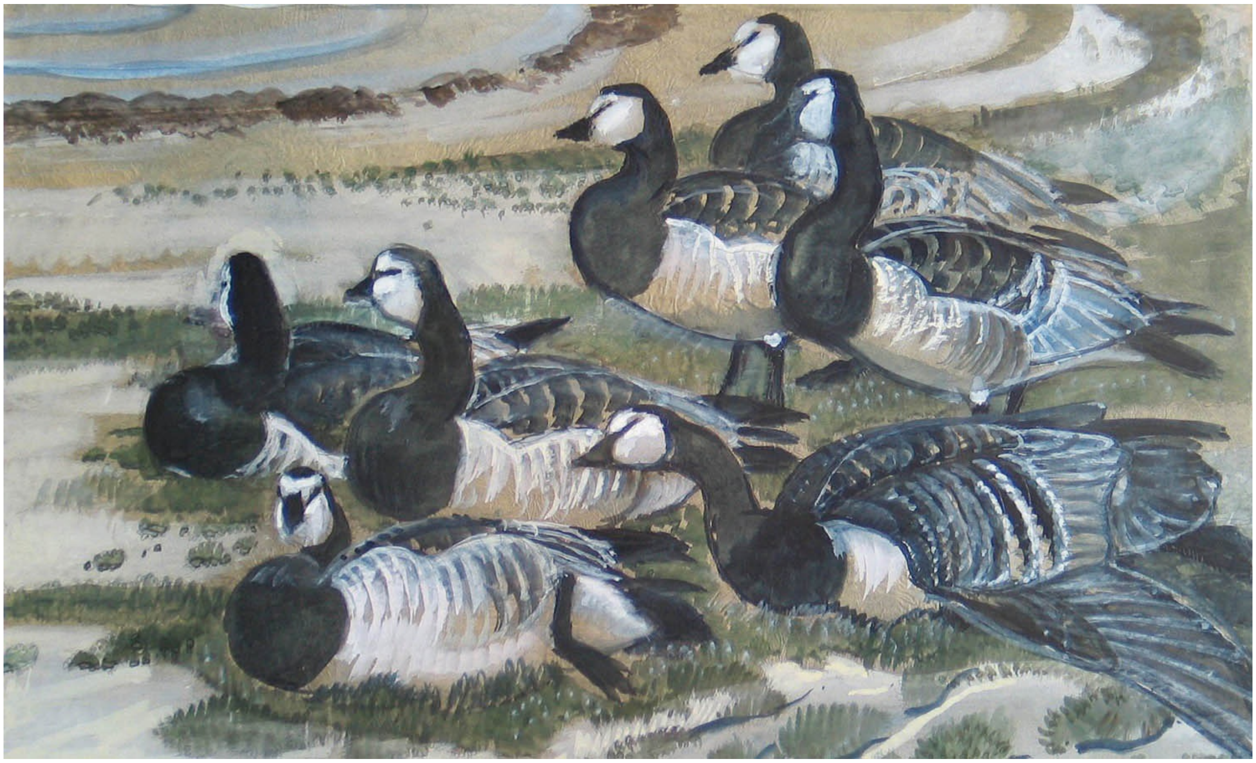


The male pheasant shows the feather-groups better than any diagram could.

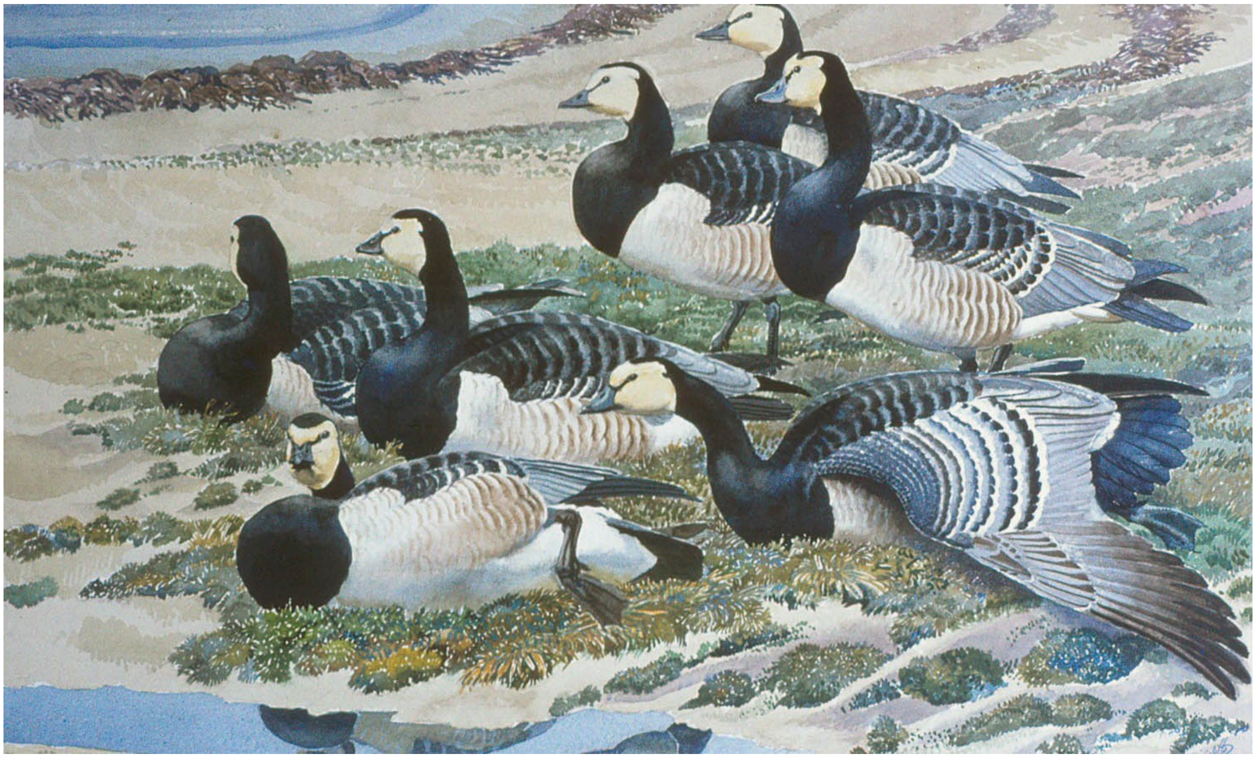


Paul Bartlett: fairy martins preening. Collage and acrylic paint.

There is a close layer of downy feathers that trap air close to the body and act as insulation. There are groups of feathers specifically arranged for the purpose of flying (the same feathers in a few specialized cases for underwater propulsion). Some feathers create cryptic and effective camouflage and can be displayed to mates and potential competitors. With all these functions to perform, the bird has to maintain its plumage in good condition and regular preening helps in this. At the base of its tail, a bird has special preen glands from which it collects and disperses oils over its plumage. This helps in waterproofing the feathers as well as general conditioning.



C.F. Tunnicliffe: cartoon for loafing barnacle geese.



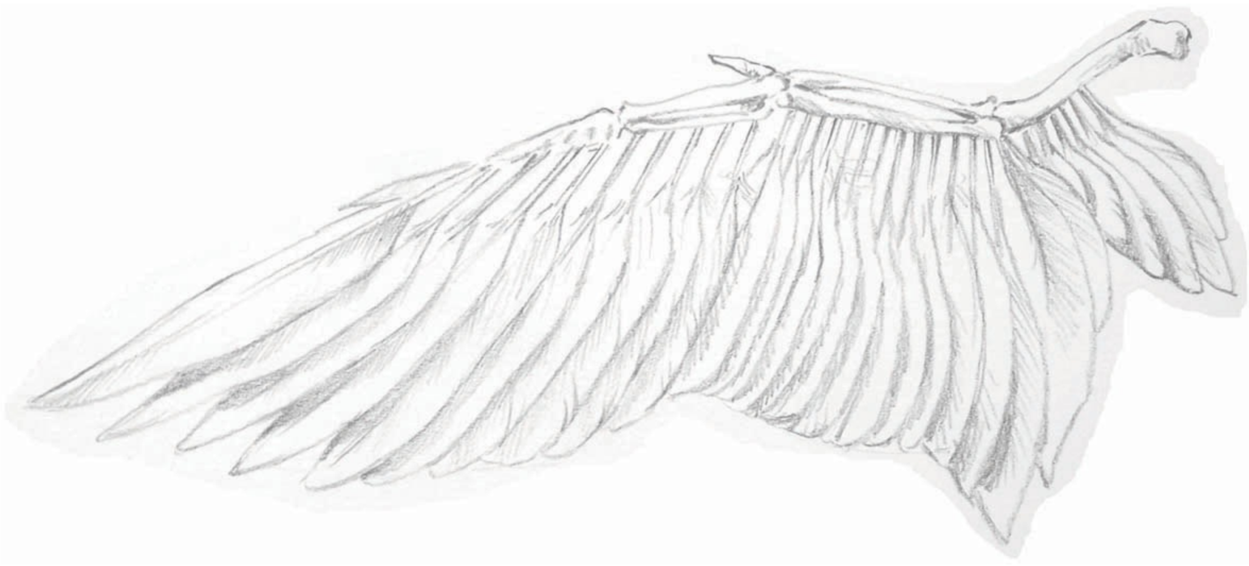
Charles Tunnicliffe: loafing barnacle geese – wing and leg

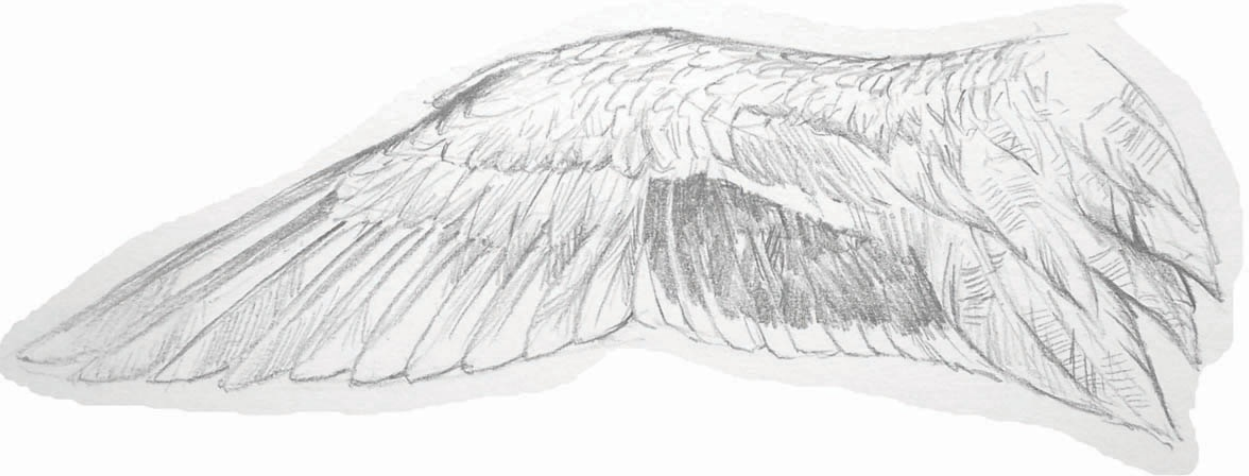
stretching. Tunnicliffe would often make small colour compositions (derived from drawings and colour studies made in the field) before embarking on his delicate large-scale watercolours.

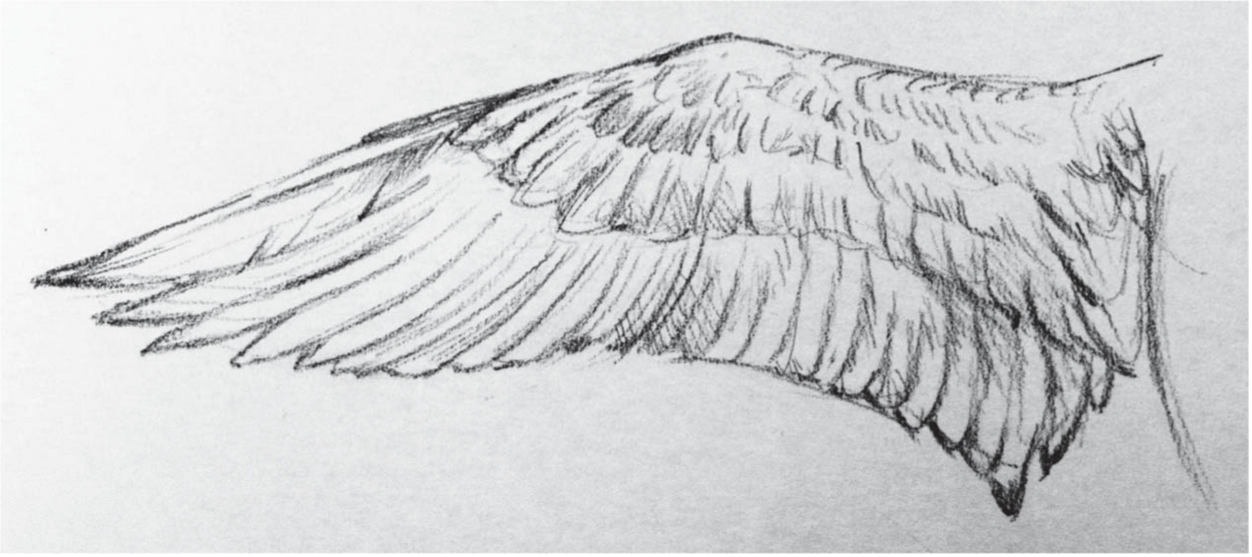
To watch a bird going through its habit of preening, and its routine of leg and wing stretching and then resting, is an extremely absorbing and, for the artist, fruitful time. During these actions the birds form the most elegant shapes and graceful contortions. During preening, birds will remain in the same area for some length of time and it pays dividends for the artist to learn where best to observe these rituals at close hand. Learning to draw such actions is a very rewarding labour.

Although the individual movements of preening birds may only last for a few seconds at most, with careful observation you will notice that it will perform similar tasks repeatedly over a period of time. This allows any previously started drawings to be resumed.

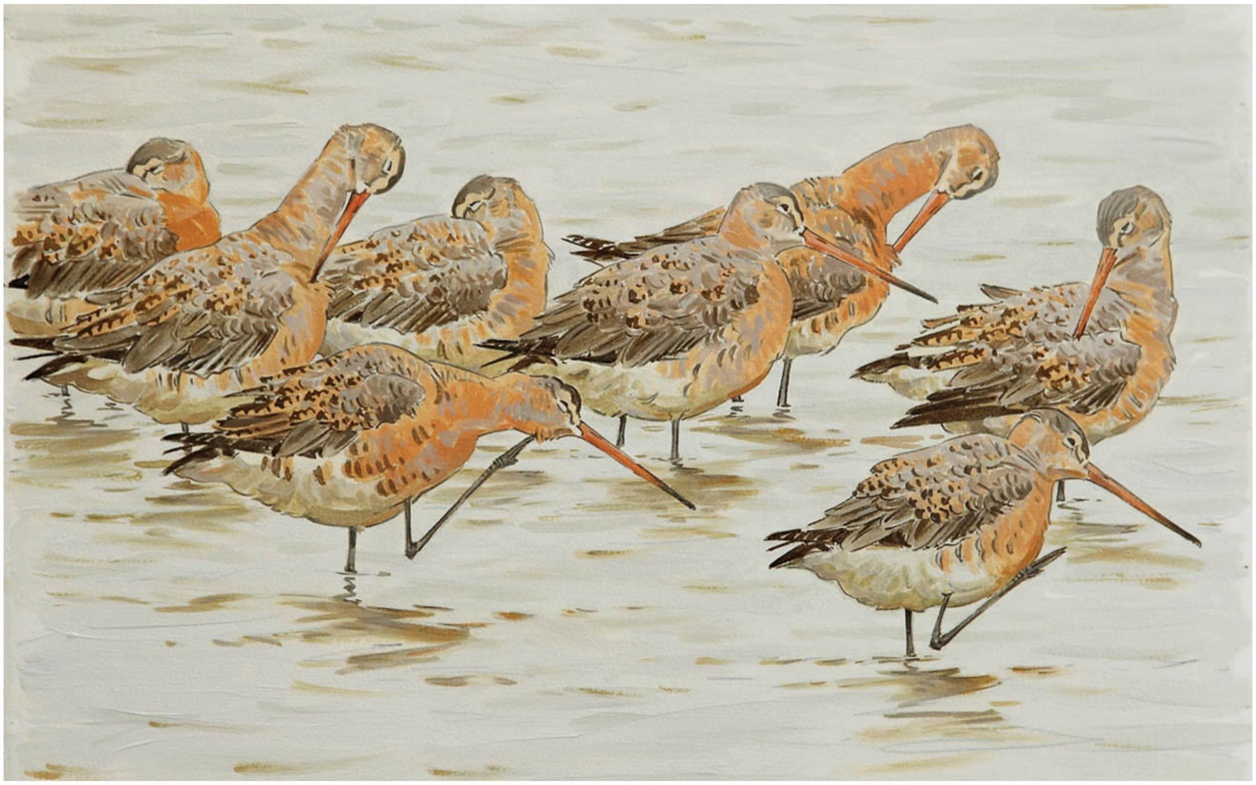
The main thing to concentrate on when trying to convey the bird in action is to discern which bits of the bird are moving and to concentrate on those primarily. For instance a curlew wing-stretching will also flex the same-side leg simultaneously. Look for the general shapes being made and block them in quickly onto the sheet. Don’t be concerned over finishing a drawing; just get individual studies of moving parts onto the page. When the bird moves from its position, stop drawing. Scratching is a rapid action. Watch carefully where the bird holds its wing when scratching certain parts of its neck and head – sometimes the leg will go over the folded wing and other times the wing is partially extended, allowing the scratching leg to slide between it and the bird’s body. Note how the body adjusts to counterbalance the action.



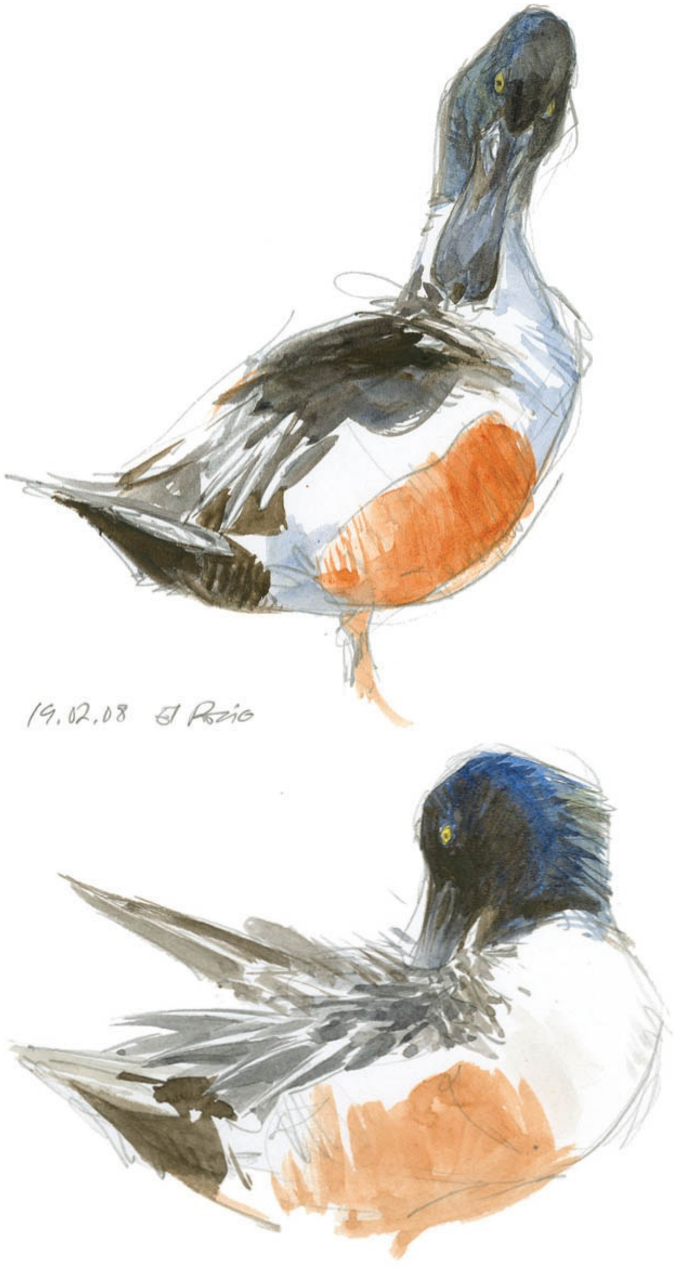




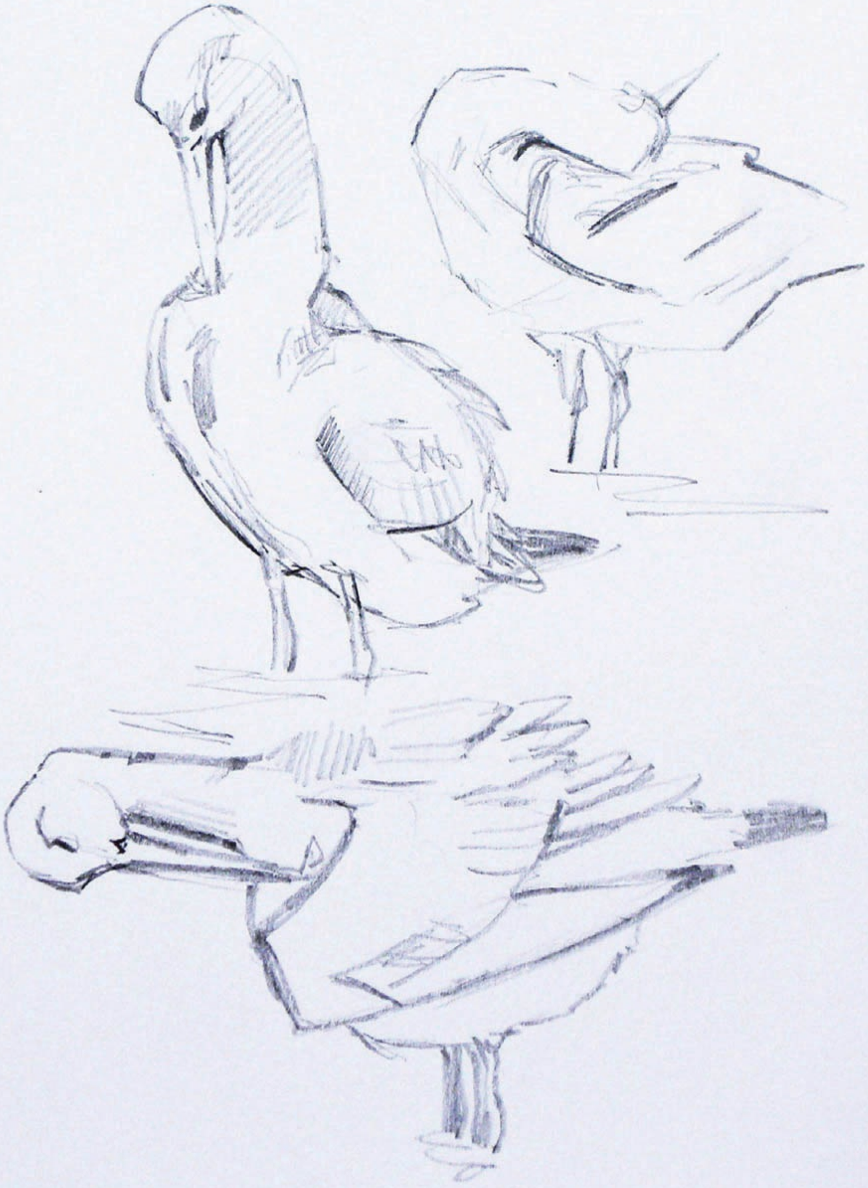
Wing anatomy of mallard duck: (top) main flight feathers attached to wing bones of right wing; (middle) top view of left wing; (bottom) underside of right wing showing coverts overlapping main flight feathers.

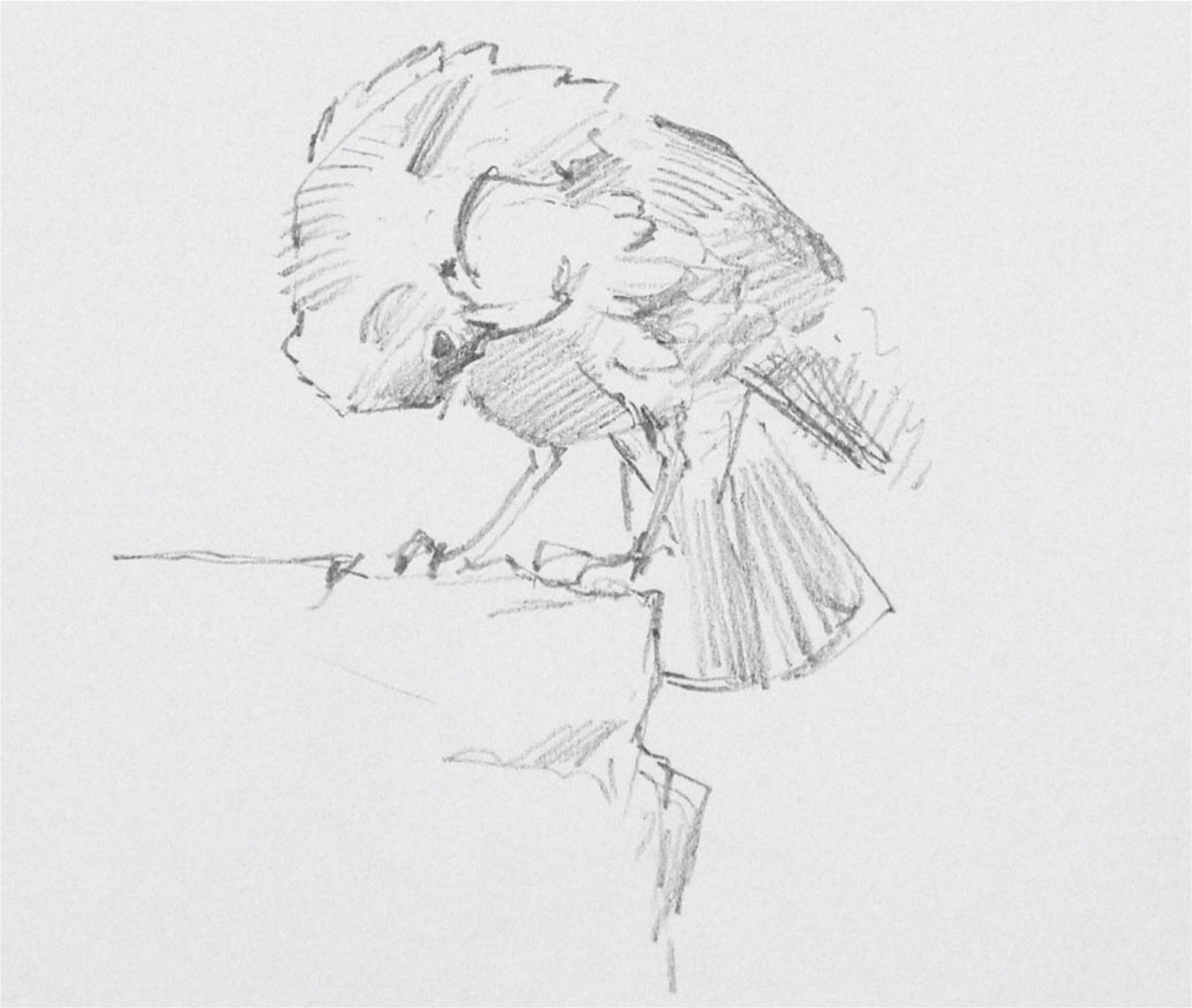


Barry Van Dusen: a group of godwits scratching, preening and settling down to doze.


19.02.08 El Rozio

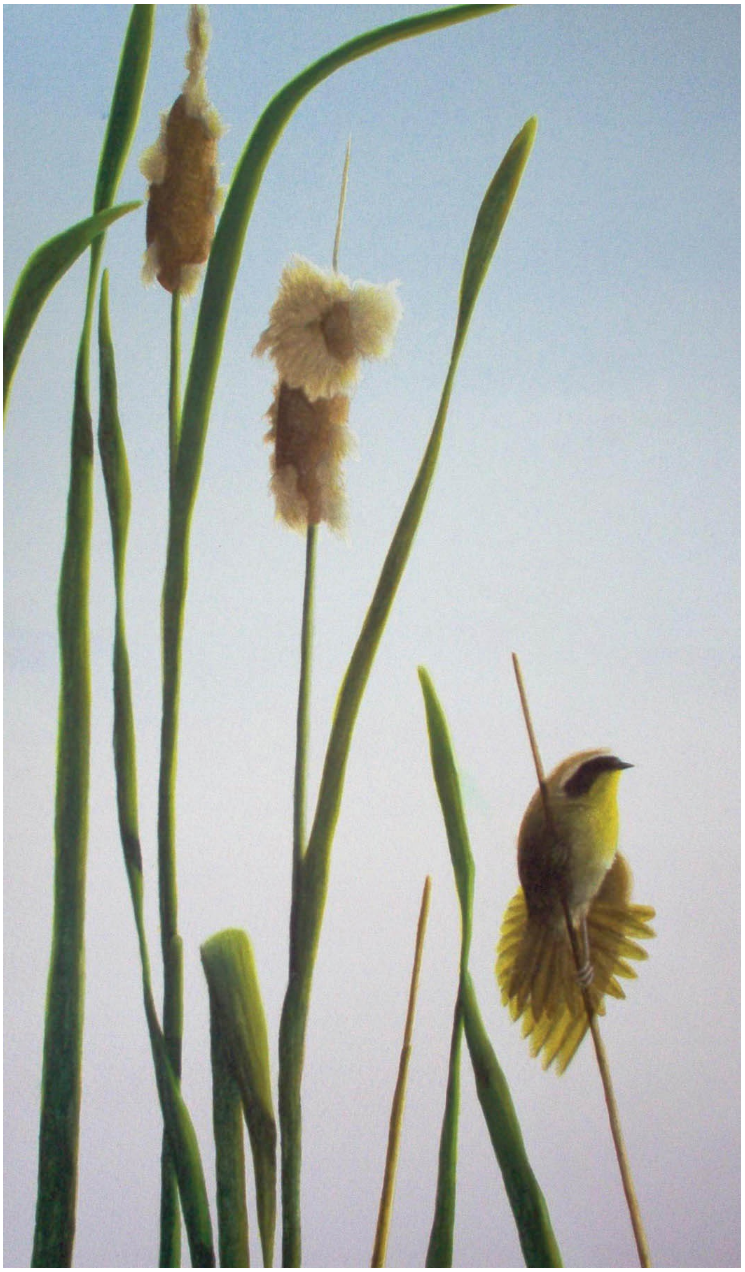
Juan Varela: Studies of drake shoveler preening. (First published in *Entre Mar y Tierra/Between Sea and Land*, Lynx Edicions, Barcelona.)



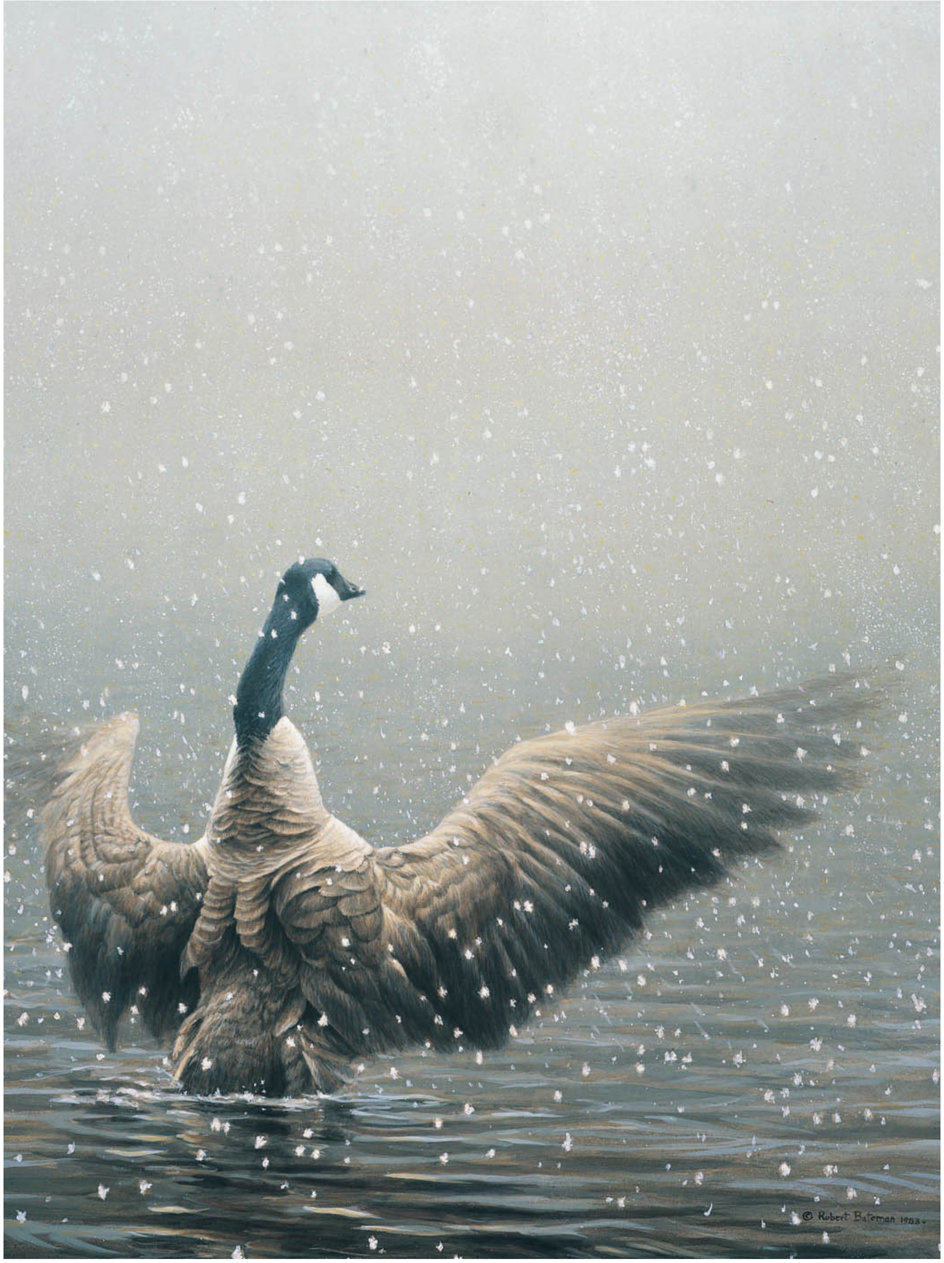


Tim Wootton: preening black-tailed godwit and blackbird.

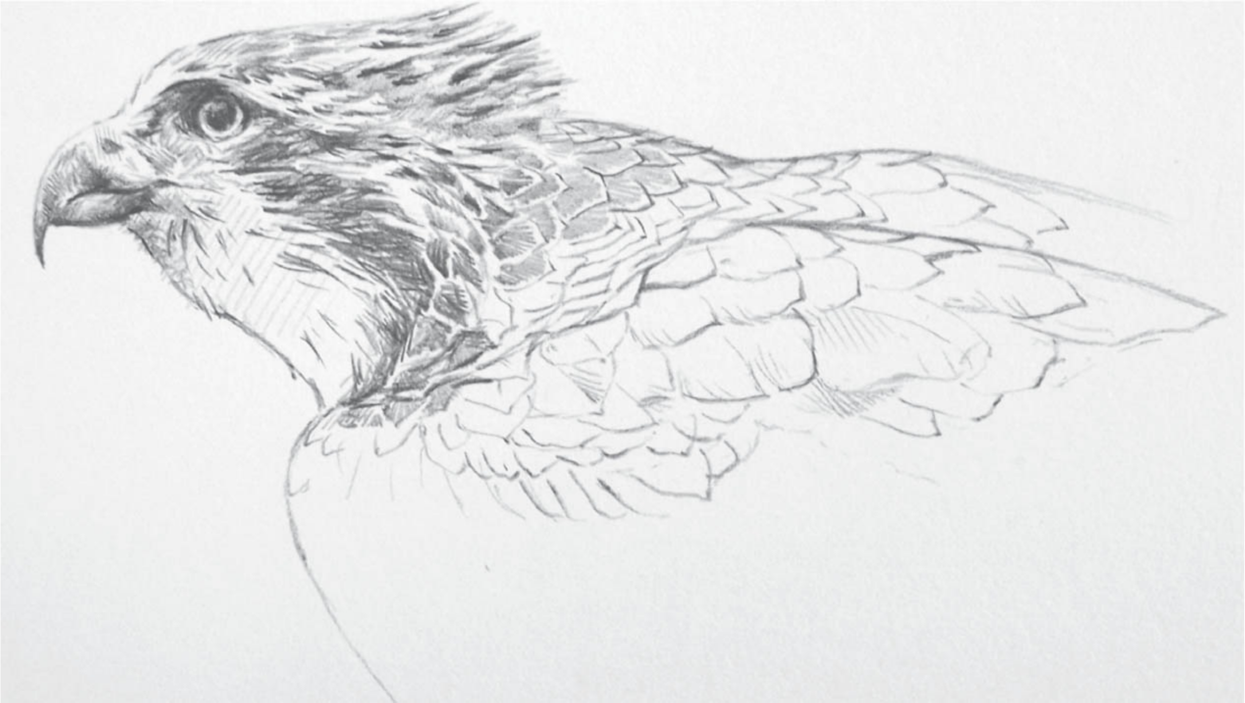
The purpose of preening feathers is to keep them in good condition, but to also keep them correctly positioned. The bird may attend to individual feathers, but its intention is to create a unified mass of that particular feather group. The feather groups may be seen as a community working toward the same goal. There are several different communities of feathers on the bird's body. When drawing the bird's plumage it is worth bearing in mind that fact and to draw the feather groups. It isn't necessary to draw each individual feather; in fact this approach may prove counter-productive in your aim of rendering a faithful image of the bird. Colour and pattern should be more important than detail.



Jocelyn Oudesluys: yellowthroat wing-and tail-stretching – a delicate study of behaviour and balance.


© Robert Bateman 1983

Robert Bateman: Canada goose wing-stretching.



Tim Wootton: osprey. A pencil study investigating the shape and perspective of feathers as they lie across the different planes of the bird’s neck and back.

EXERCISE: MAKE A MODEL TO SHOW THE PERSPECTIVE OF A FEATHER

Take an A4 sheet of paper and lightly sketch a diagonal grid in pencil. Using a felt-tip pen, draw scales/feathers using the grid as a guide.

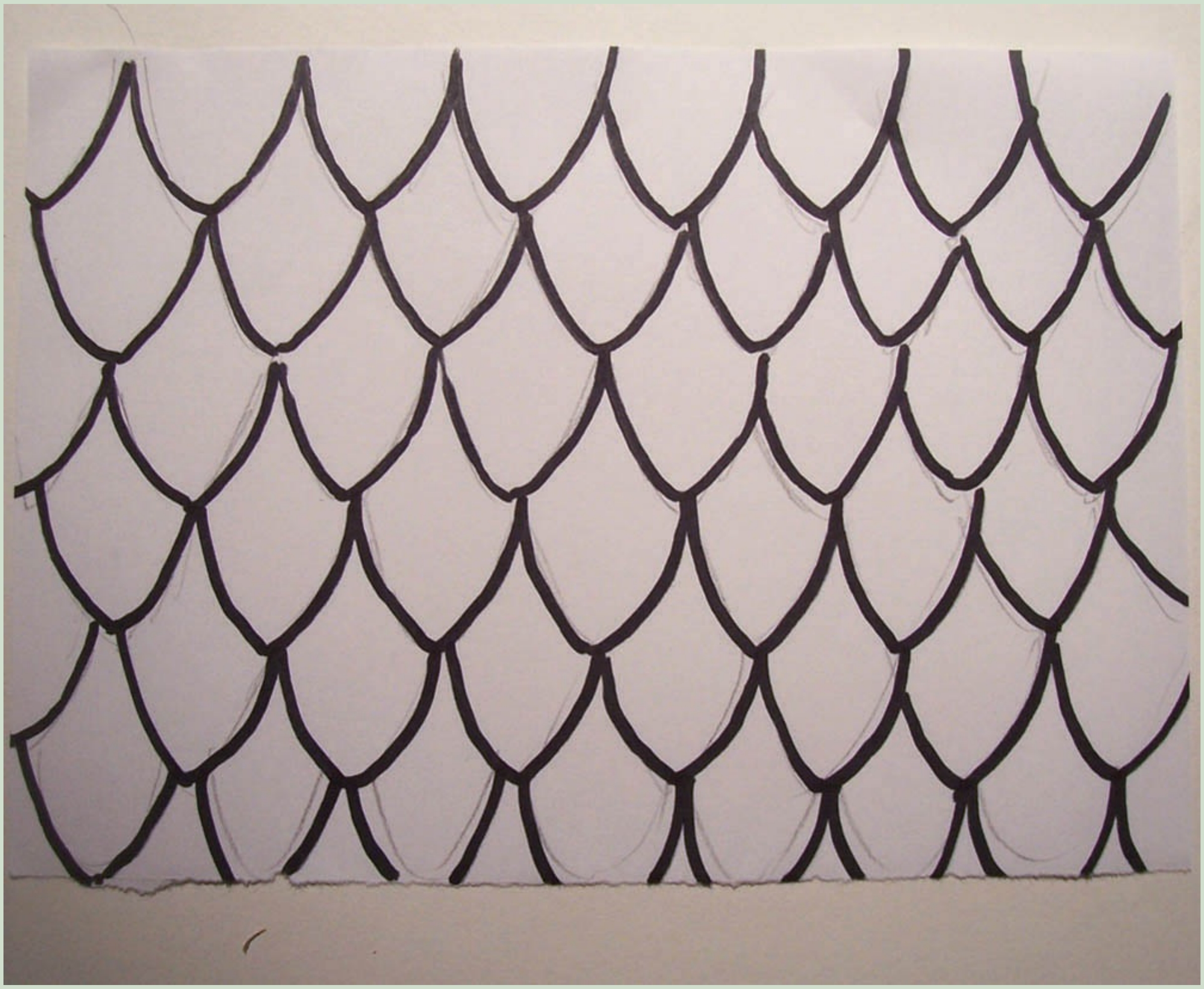
Roll the sheet into a tube and fasten using sticky tape and lay it down.

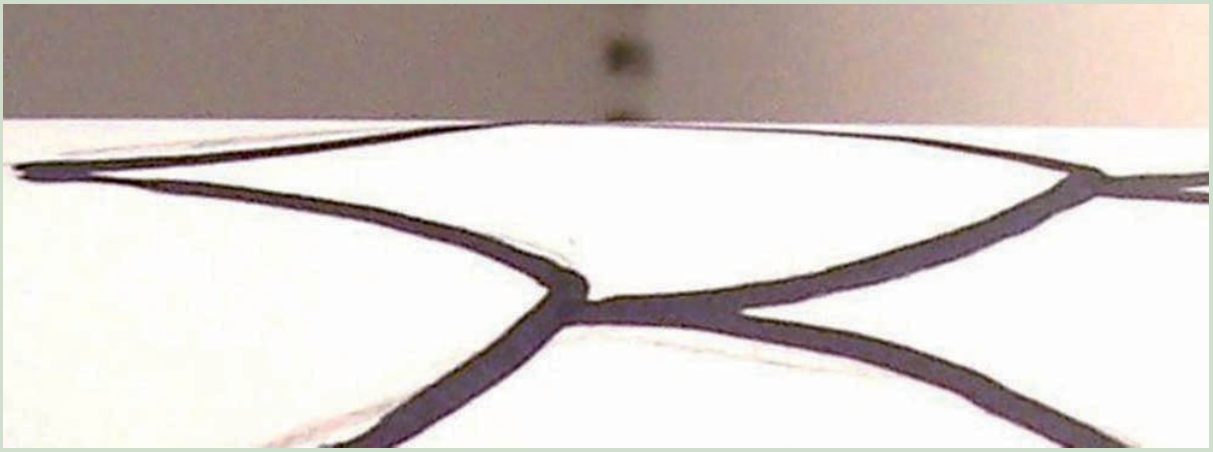
Observe how the shape of the ‘feathers’ alters as they start to get to the edge of the curve. The top (and bottom) feathers are very flat relative to the ones in the middle of the tube which aren’t being affected by perspective quite as radically.

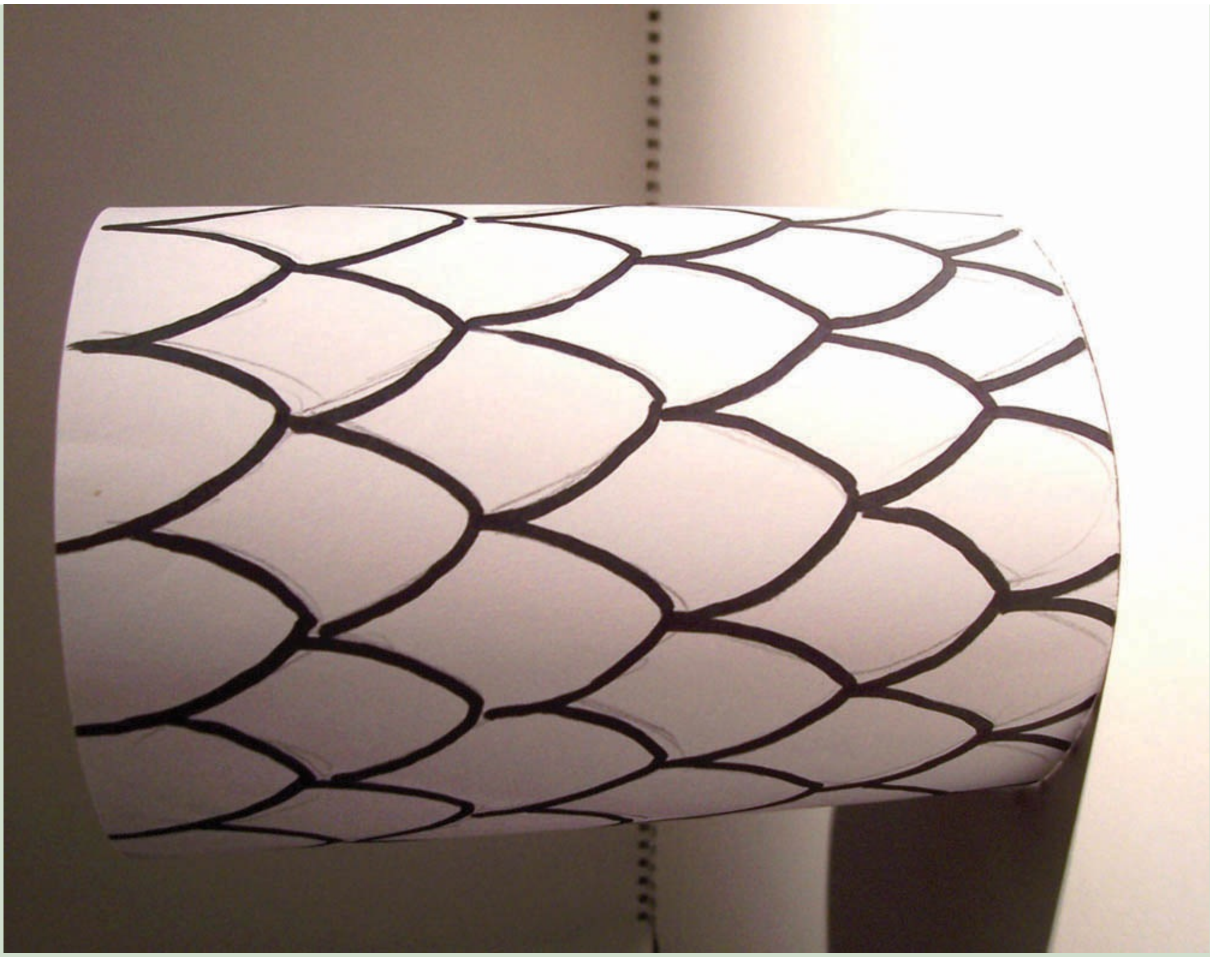
Feathers at the edge of the curve are compressed flat.

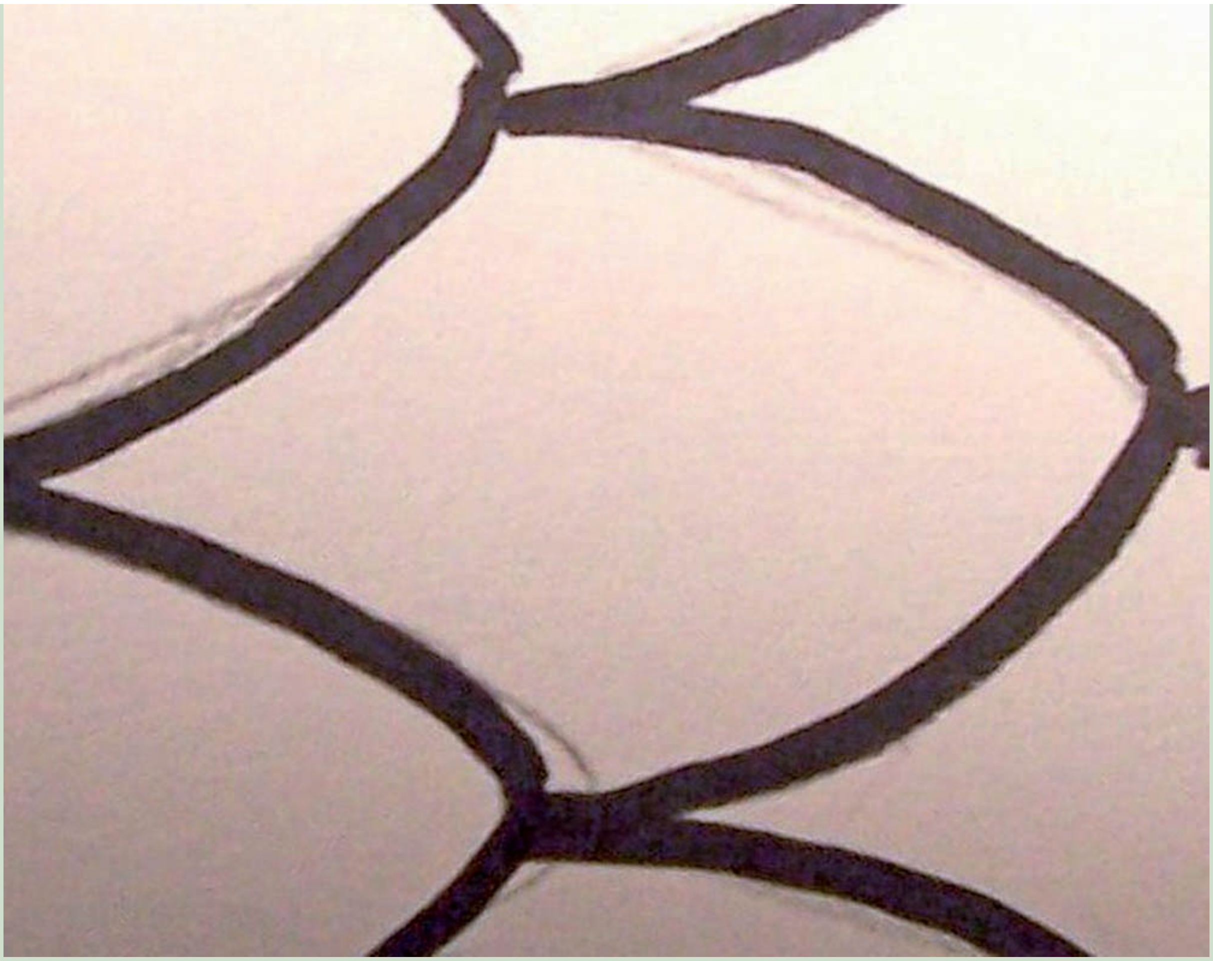
Feathers in the centre are less distorted. Also note how much light is hitting the top edge, so much so that the very black lines are almost washed out.

These are subtle but important changes to basic shapes which occur in nature.



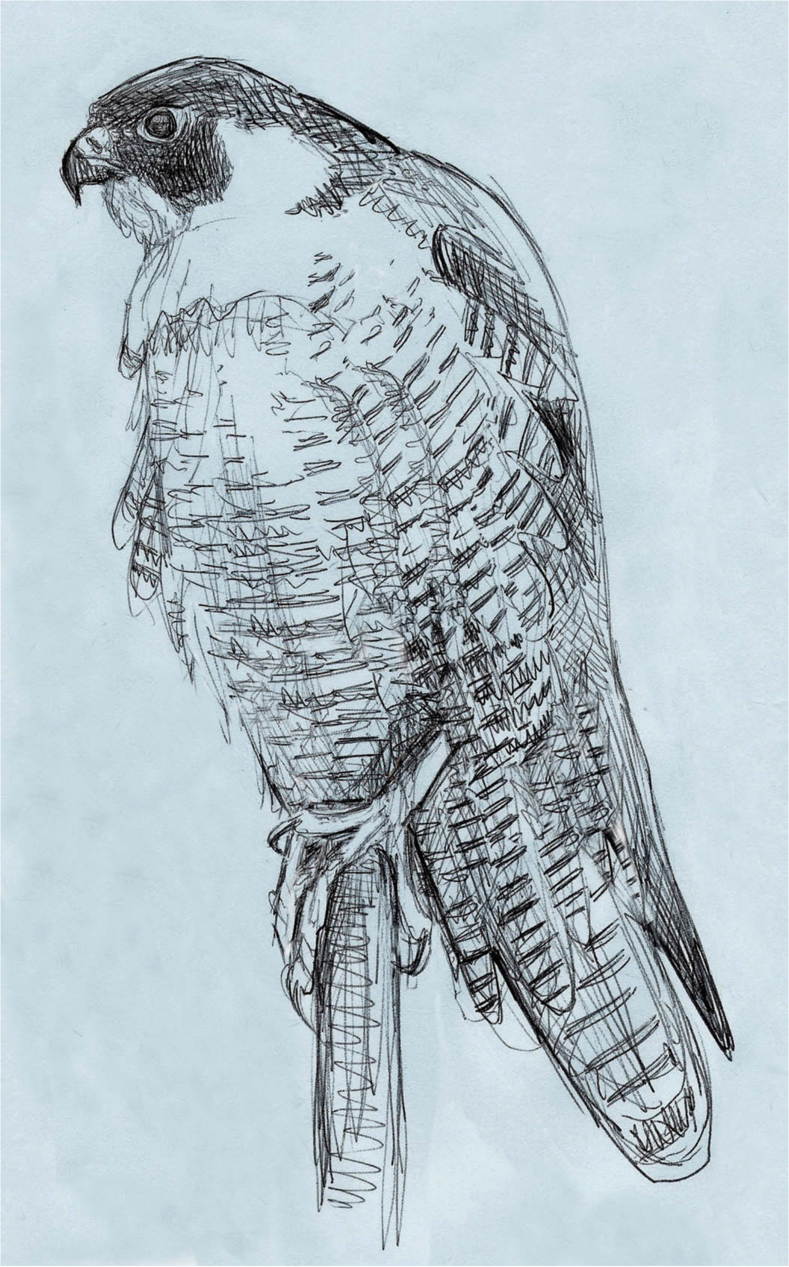




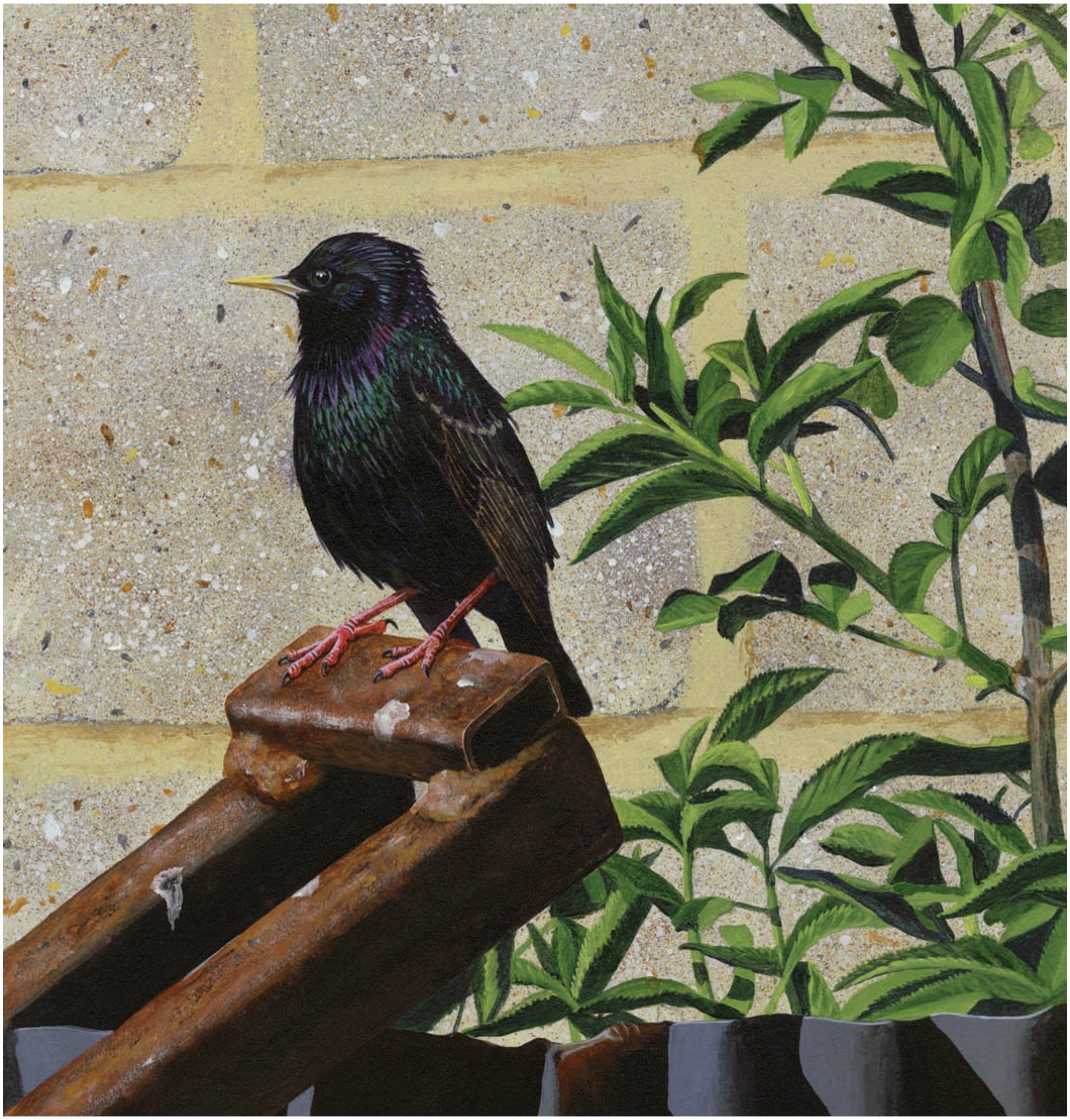


Model showing the perspective of a feather.

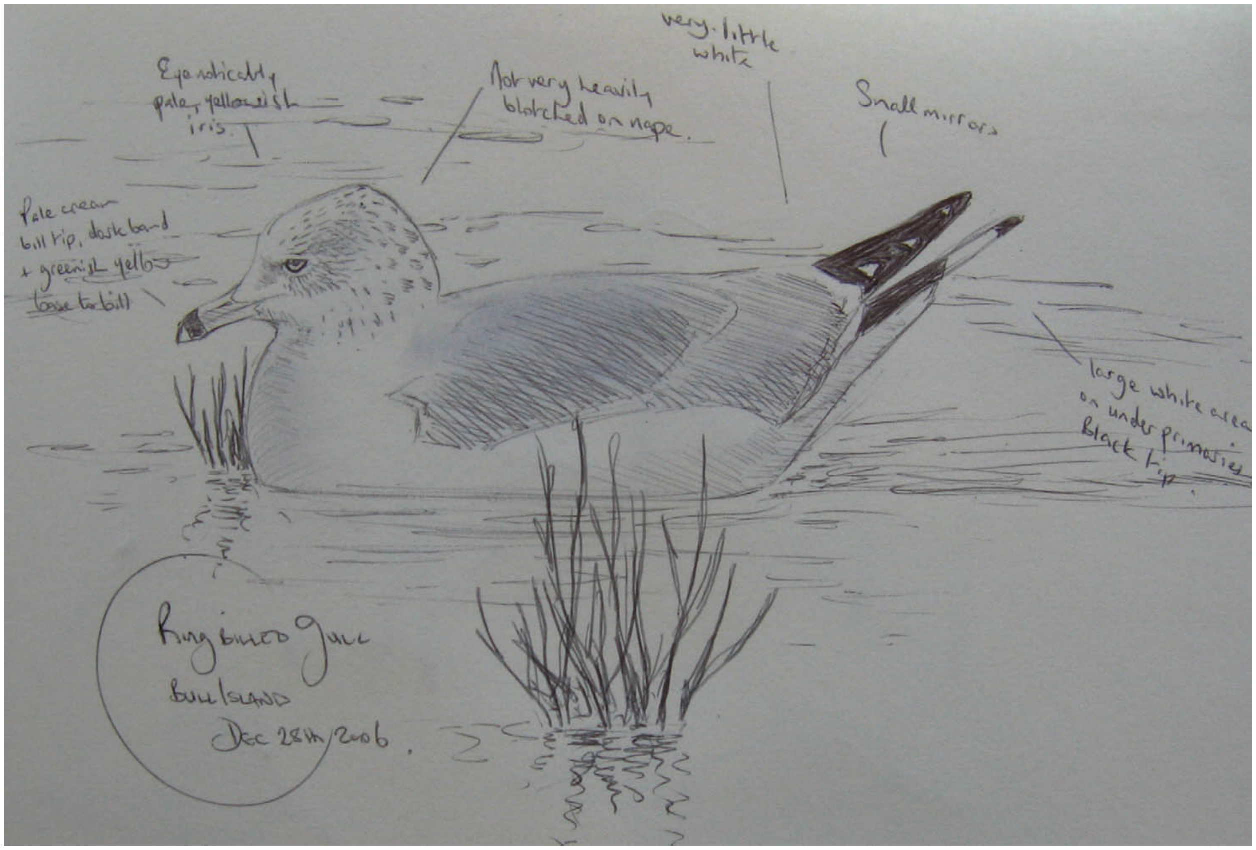
Although feather groups can be massed together and treated collectively there are occasions when individual feathers may be drawn; wing and tail feathers are obvious candidates and so are hackles and crests (neck and head feathers) and scapular feathers. Where this is the case, pay attention to the way they lie across the body, or stand up from it. Often the shape of the feathers can assist in moulding the shape of the bird, as can the way light reflects from them and the shadows that form underneath them.



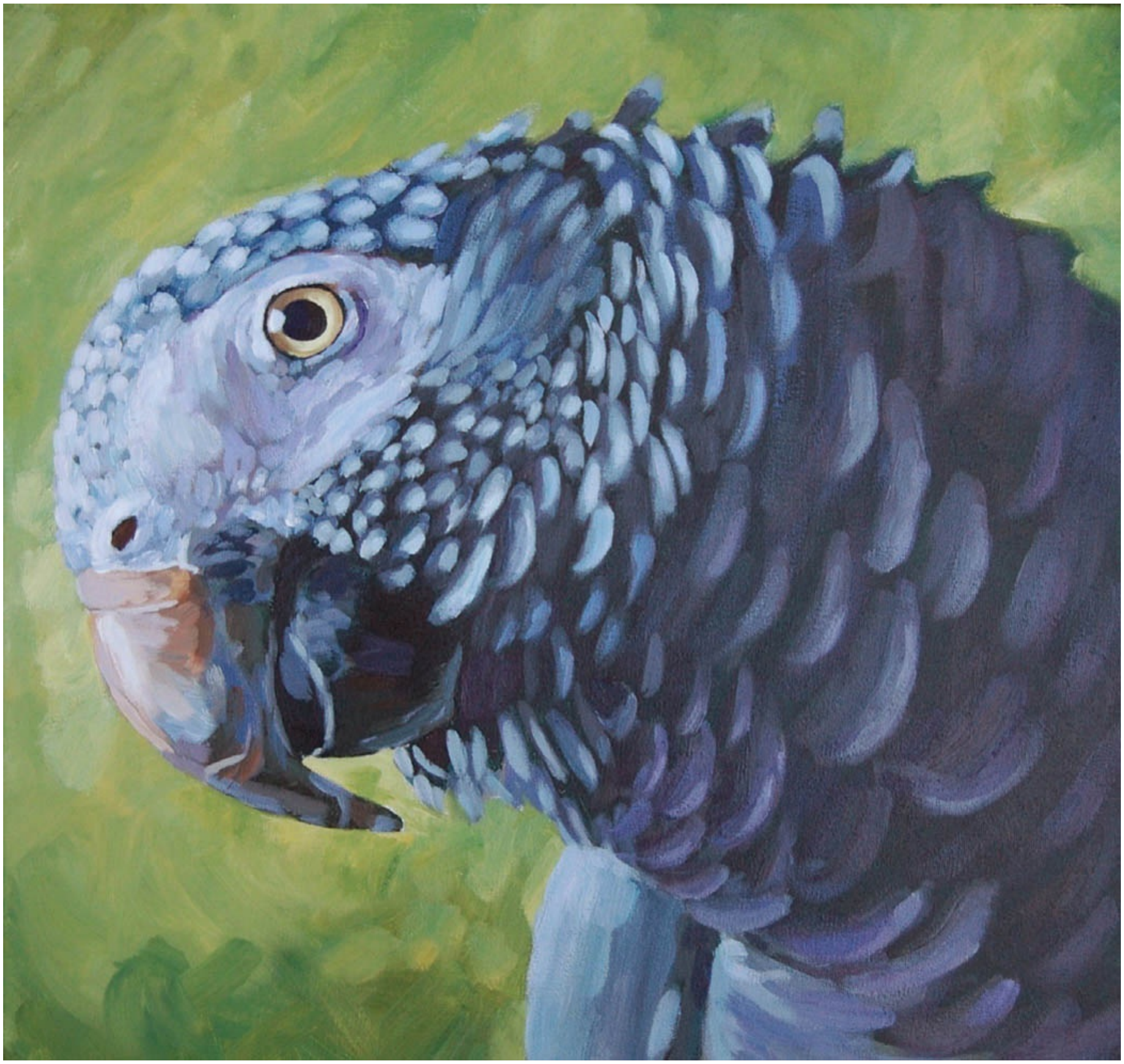
Ed Keeble: peregrine falcon. Pen and ink study. Careful drawing of the feather markings sculpt the faint undulations across the bird's breast, whilst the direction expresses the roundness and solidity of the subject.



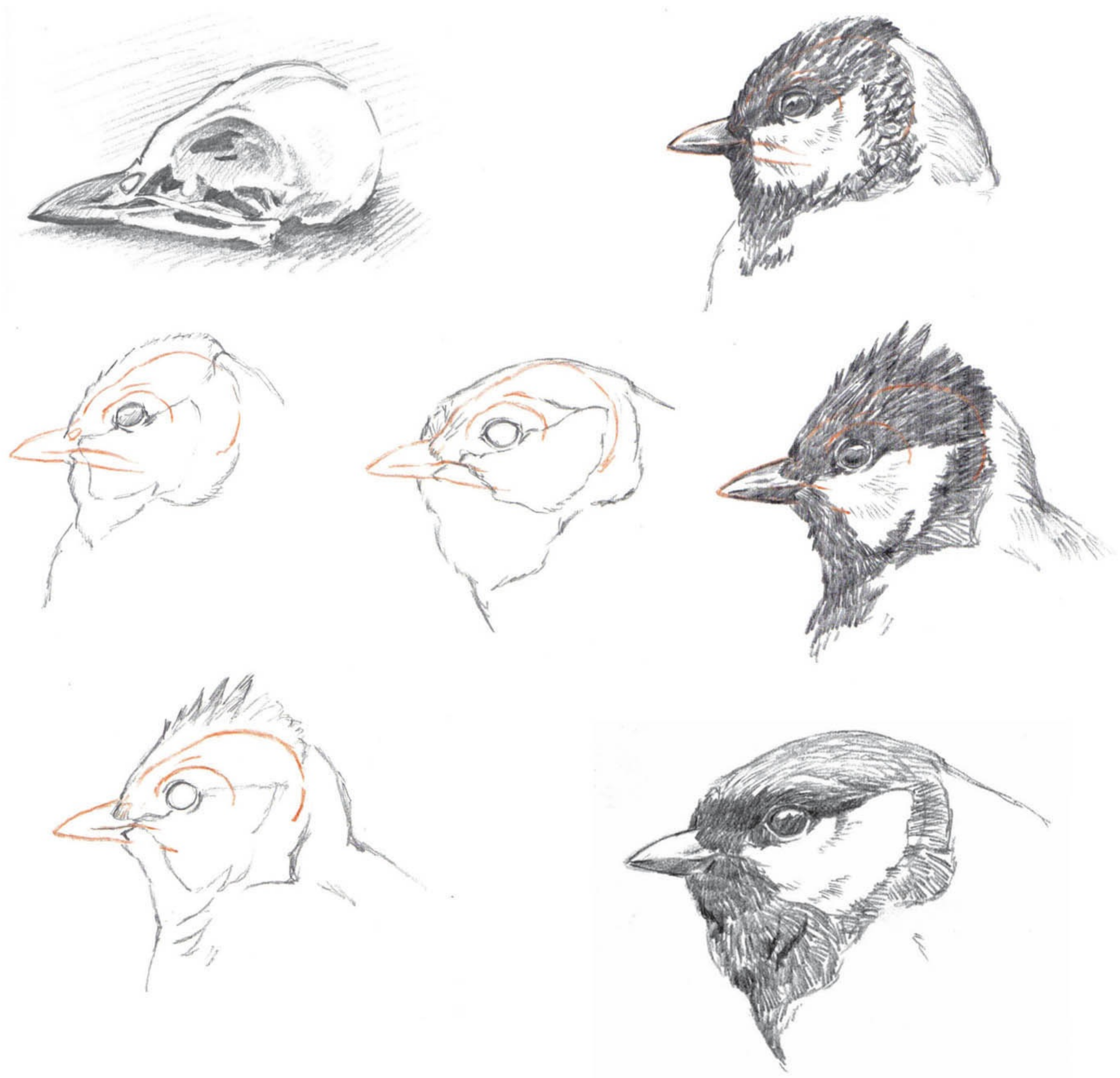
Mike Woodcock: *Ordinary – Extraordinary*. The artist finds inspiration in the commonplace and seemingly unremarkable: a European starling and man-made structures make for an interesting juxtaposition of textures.


Eye noticeably pale, yellowish iris.
Not very heavily blotched on nape.
very little white
Small mirrors
Pale cream bill tip, dark band + greenish yellow base to bill
large white area on under primaries
Black tip.
Ring billed Gull
Bull Island
Dec 28th/2006

Alan Dalton: ring-billed gull in Ireland. Field drawing specifying the important features of this local rarity from America. Gulls typically have very soft and fairly featureless plumage – the directional hatching and soft tones describe both texture and form simultaneously.



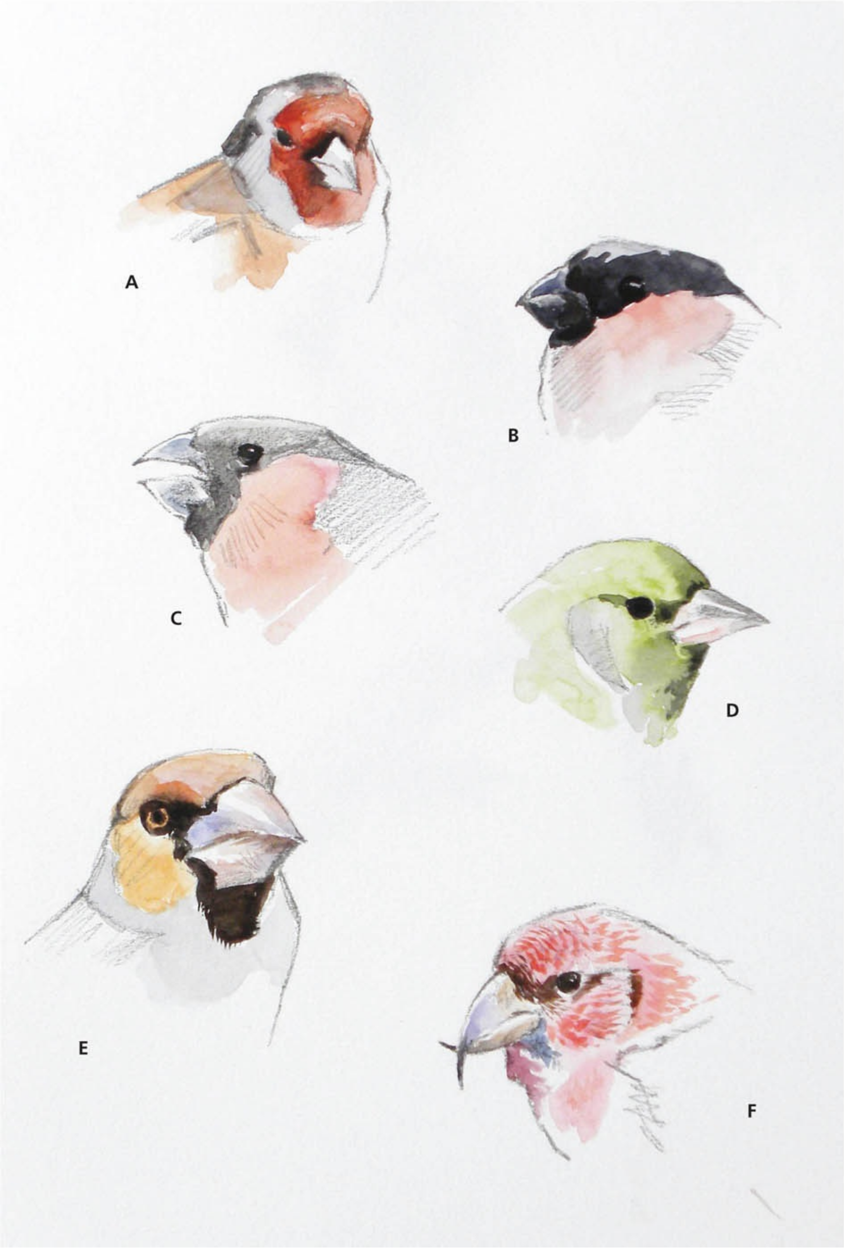
Frank Van Boxtel: ***Caillou Ruffle*****. The intimate nature of the portrait and the nature of the bird's plumage allow the artist to indulge in the texture and structure of the individual feathers, but this isn't detail for the sake of detail; each painted mark contributes to the essence of the form and the spirit of the bird.**



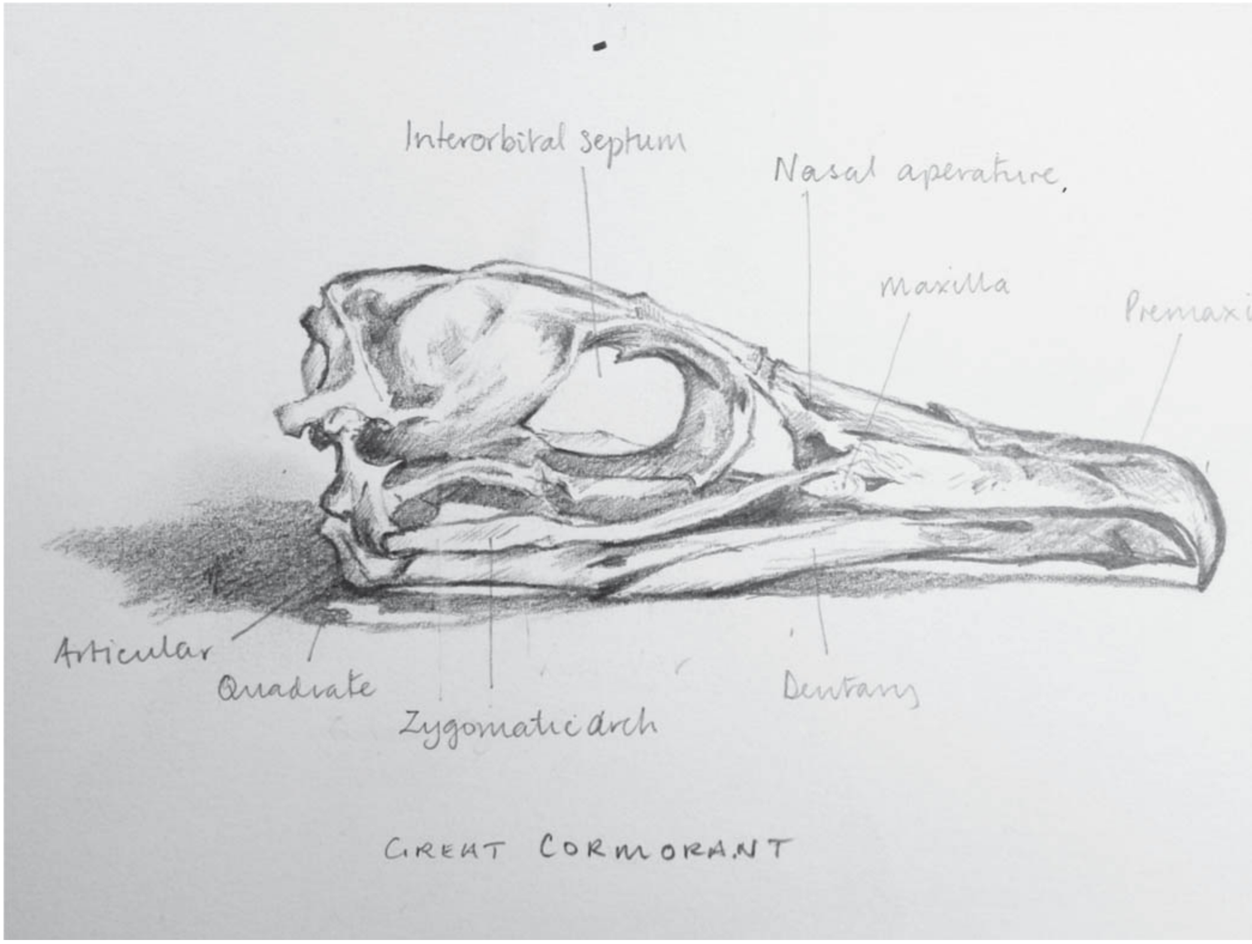
Although the great tit's internal structure remains constant, it can alter its physical appearance (and therefore send visual signals) by controlling certain groups of feathers.

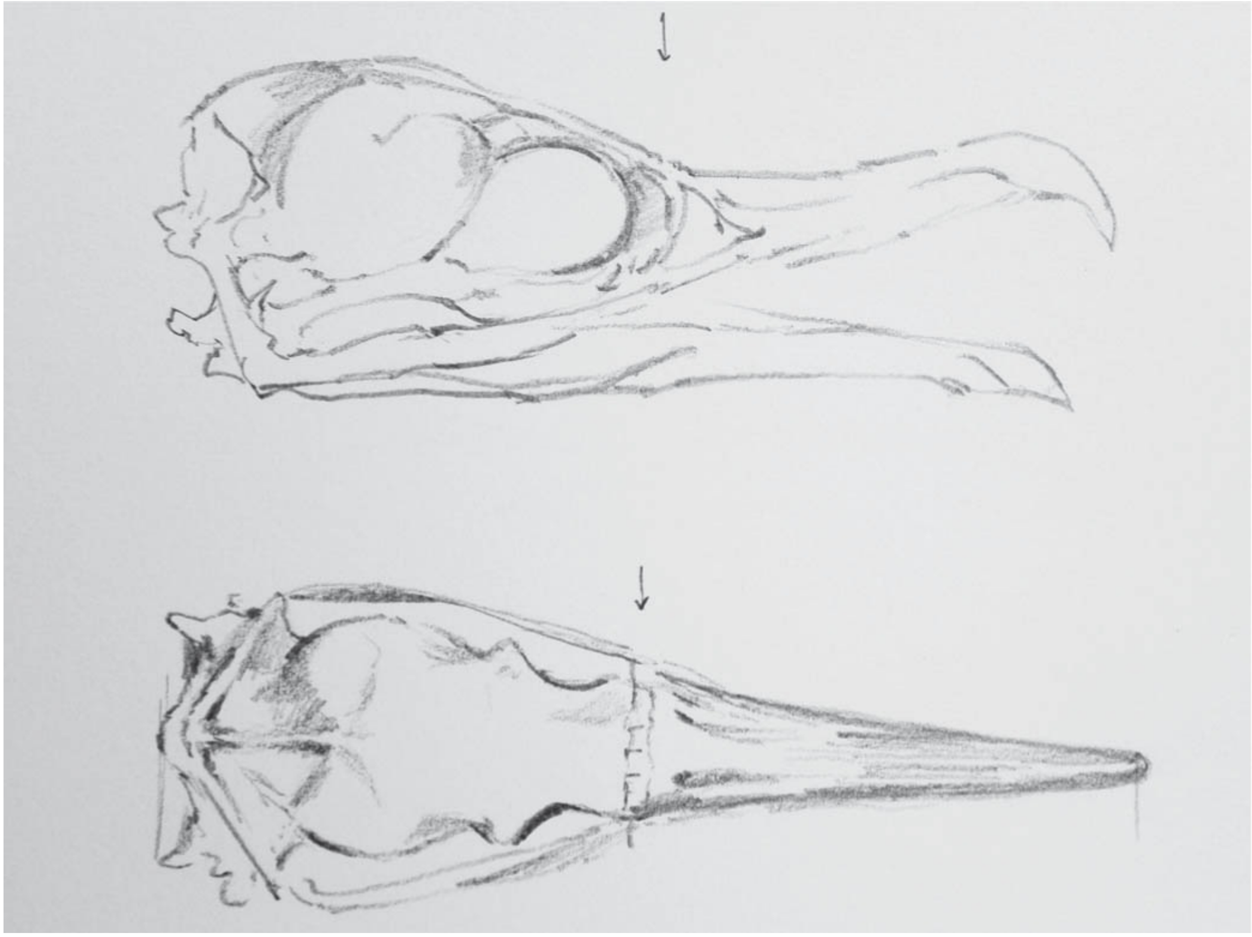
BEAKS

A defining feature of birds is their beaks and this feature also reveals much about the habit of the species. The bill (beak), although diverse in shape and size, is generally used for the specific purposes of feeding and preening. Not only is there huge variety: the long and terminally spatulate beak of the spoonbill; the immensely strong and powerful bills of the hornbills and parrots; the delicately up-curved bill of avocets and down-curved of curlews and hoopoe; thick, short finch-beaks; fine, slim insect-eating beaks of warblers; and all manner of colours and textures – each is ideally suited to the purpose. The flamingos have evolved a bill that accommodates their general anatomy and diet – they feed upside down. When depicting a bird, the scale, shape and relationship between the bill and eye are critical in capturing the character of the species. Pay great attention to this aspect of the bird.

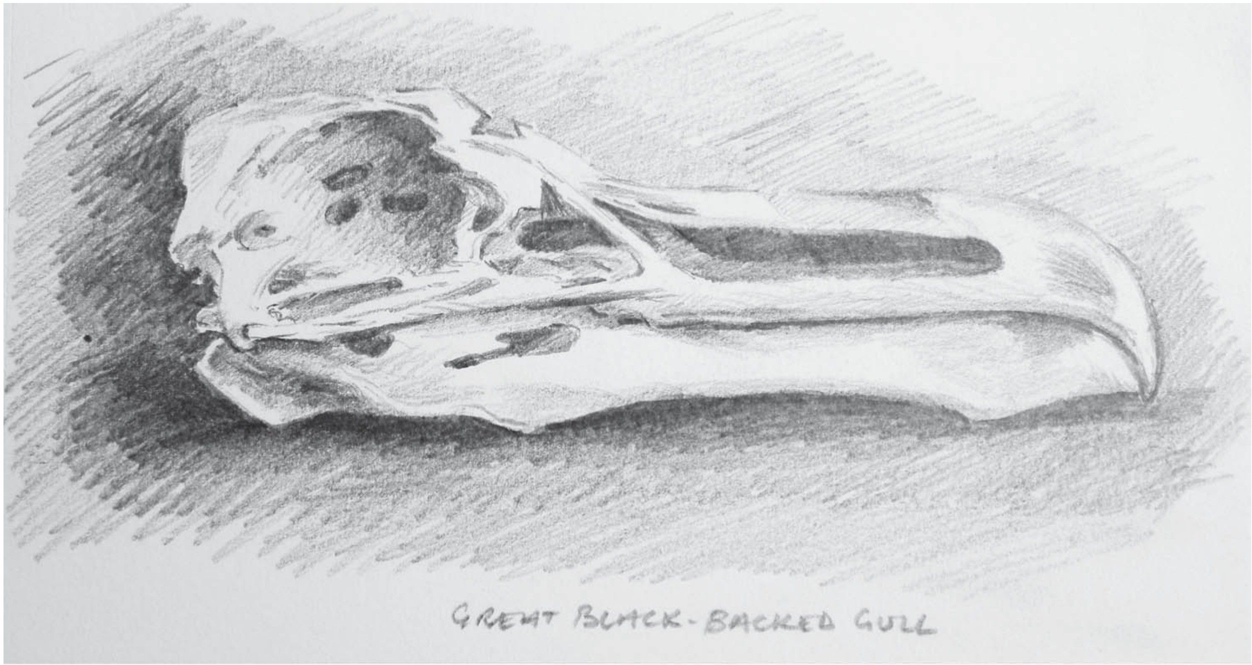


Even within the finch family, there is a variety of bill types, although their function is principally the same (to extract and crush seeds).
A: goldfinch (dextrous bill for picking thistle seeds).
B and C: bullfinch (crushing fruit seeds).
D: greenfinch ('multi-purpose' bill for eating soft fruits and seeds).
E: hawfinch (giant cherry-stone crushing bill).
F: crossbill (removing seeds from pinecones).

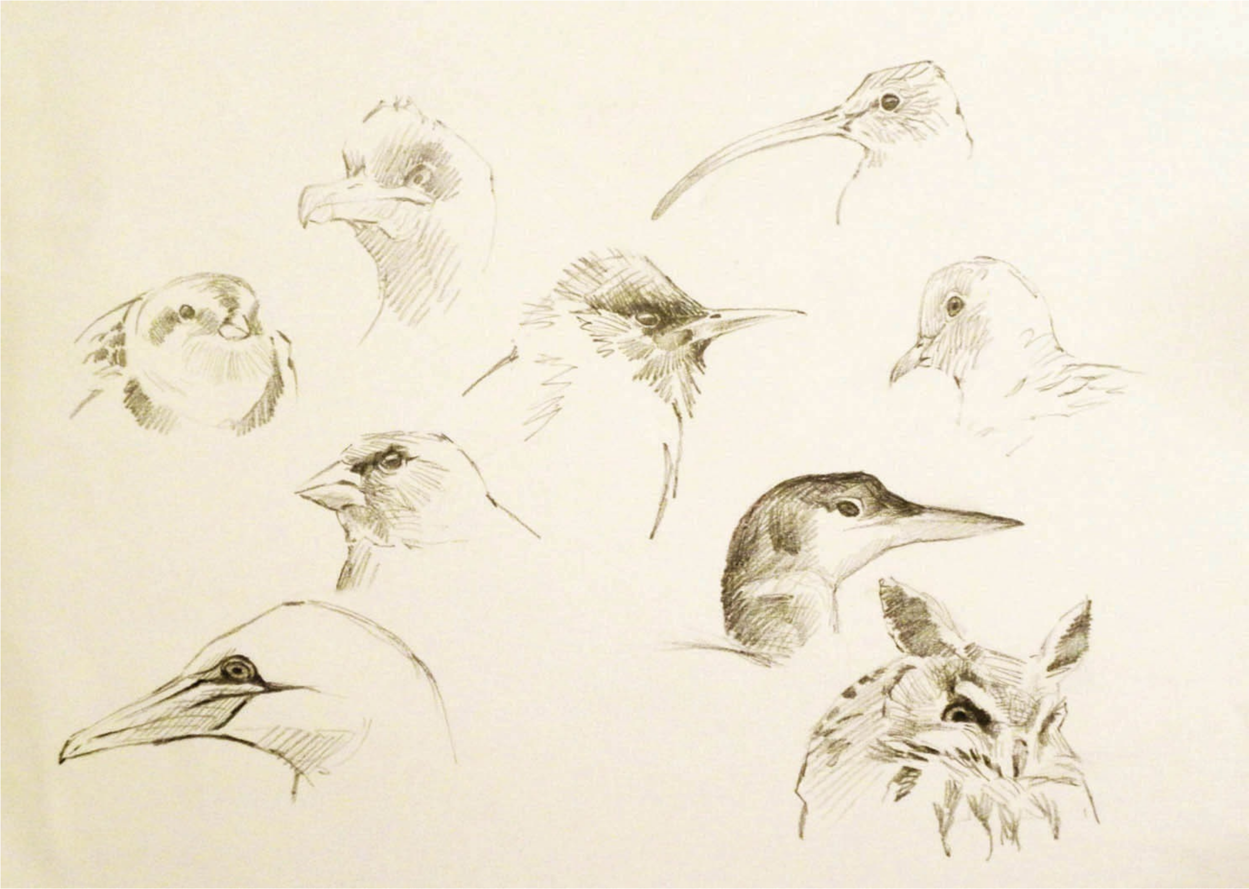

Interorbital septum
Nasal aperature
Maxilla
Premaxi
Articular
Quadrate
Zygomatic arch
Dentary
GREAT CORMORANT



Tim Wootton: skull of a great cormorant. Note how the character of the bird is encapsulated in this structure; the second sheet of drawings highlights the hinge arrangement on the upper mandible. It's obvious that birds open their bills where the jaw hinges, but perhaps not so clear that they can also flex their upper mandibles too, giving them greater dexterity when catching and manipulating food items.


GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL

Tim Wootton: skull of a great black-backed gull. It’s apparent just from this skull what this species is all about: killing prey by bludgeoning (smaller birds and their young), eating eggs and catching fish.



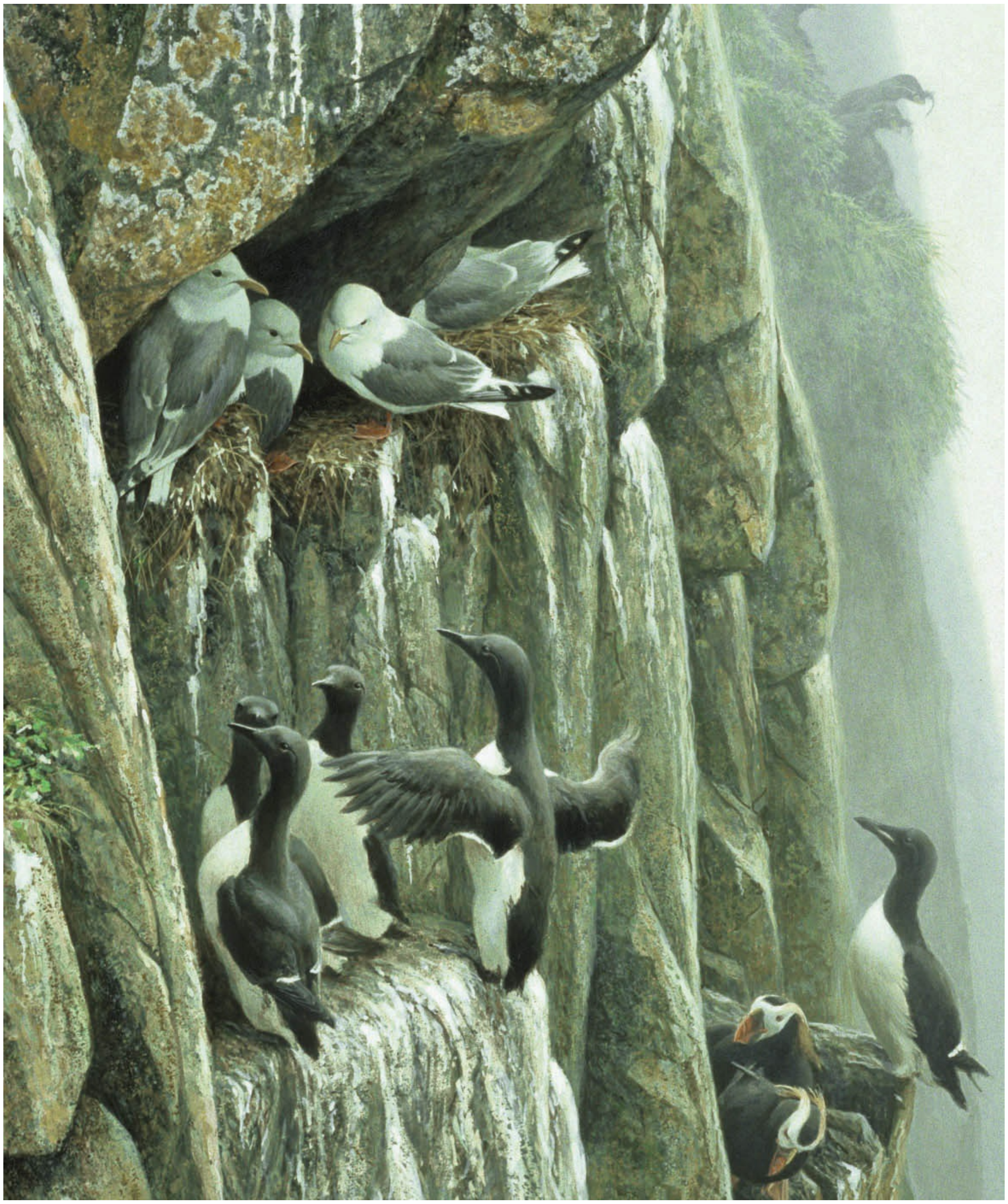
Tim Wootton: bird portraits. The arrangement of facial features gives each bird a certain look, or character if you like. Catch this and your bird will not only look like the species it's meant to portray, but also have a certain life to it.

CHAPTER 4

DRAWING BIRD TYPES

> Oh, I don’t know, Father, is there a difference between crows and blackbirds?
>
> Melanie Daniels in *The Birds*

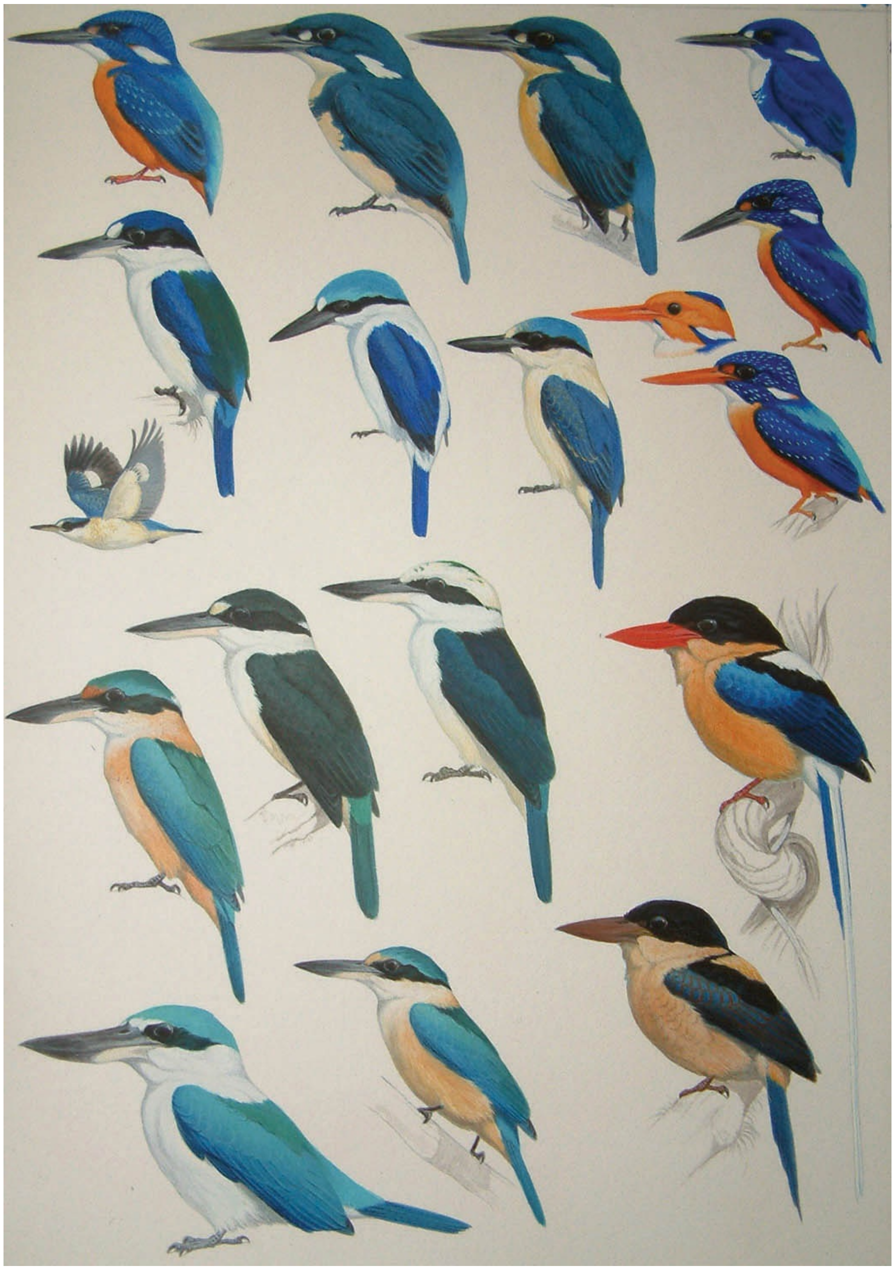
Considering the range of size and shape, the many different ways they move and the variety of habitats they occupy, birds could be considered one of the broadest areas of study, particularly if one starts to delve into biology or migration, or any of the many other specialized areas. Air, land, sea (both on it and under it), extremities of latitude and altitude – some spend half the year in one hemisphere and the rest in the other; some spend half their lives on frozen wasteland; some spend nearly all their lives on the wing and some cannot fly at all; some migrate over 20,000 miles every year and others range less than a few hundred yards all their lives – their plumage encompasses every colour of the rainbow (plus black and white) and each species is specifically and perfectly adapted to being what it is. This is undoubtedly a big and fascinating subject.



Robert Bateman: *Pribilof Cliff*.

As with all big subjects, it's best to break them up into smaller, more digestible chunks. In this section we'll look at a selection of bird types: that is, those that share many similar characteristics of anatomy and appearance. It will, inevitably, be the merest slice of the fodder available, but it will address some of the major areas that could occupy the bird artist and maybe open the doors to further investigation.

We'll look at bird types that are easily recognizable and that are easy to study – those that are easy to approach and get a decent view. As your interest in birds increases, so will your knowledge of them, as will your ability to catch them in your mind's eye and on paper.



Adam Bowley: Melanesia kingfishers, identification plate. The bill shapes, postures and overall silhouette identify these birds as being closely related yet they each represent a different species; in fact there are about ninety different species of kingfisher in the world. Although a scientific illustration, the artist introduces the

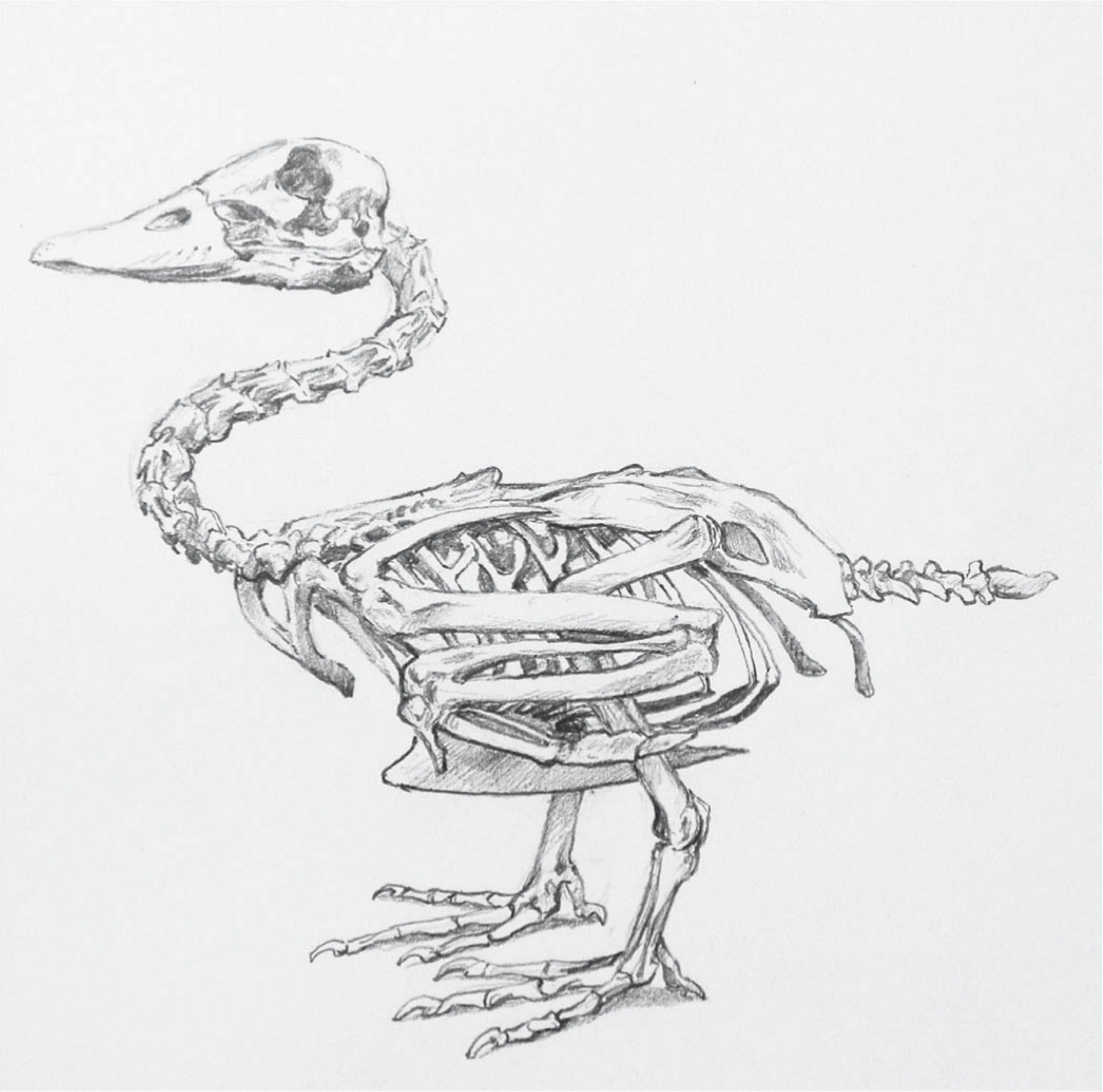
occasional slight pose change as the eye follows the lines of birds; one or two with a downwards glance break up the repetition and give the birds a subtle sense of activity.

When starting out, it's best to approach subjects that are easily located and stay fairly still – anyone who's ever watched a wren flitting through shrubbery, appearing momentarily and then disappearing only to reappear yards from where it was last seen, can appreciate the problems in trying to capture the creature in pencil, and how daunting this would be to the beginner. Therefore, although still not easy, a domestic mallard on the local pond would seem a much more accessible proposition.

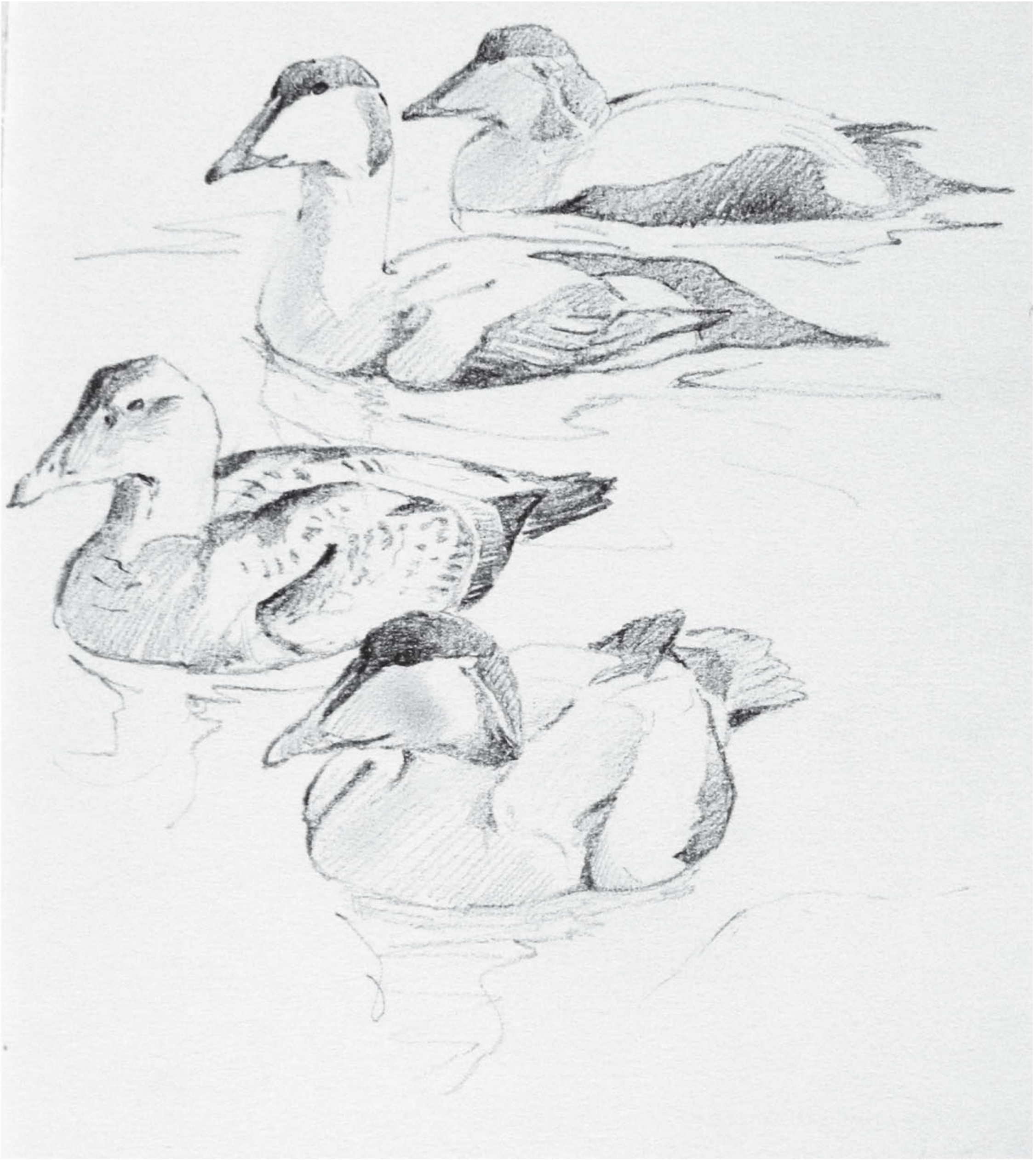
In the anatomy section, it was apparent that all birds share common characteristics. In this section we'll be focusing more on the specific similarities which can allow us to group certain birds together.

DUCKS

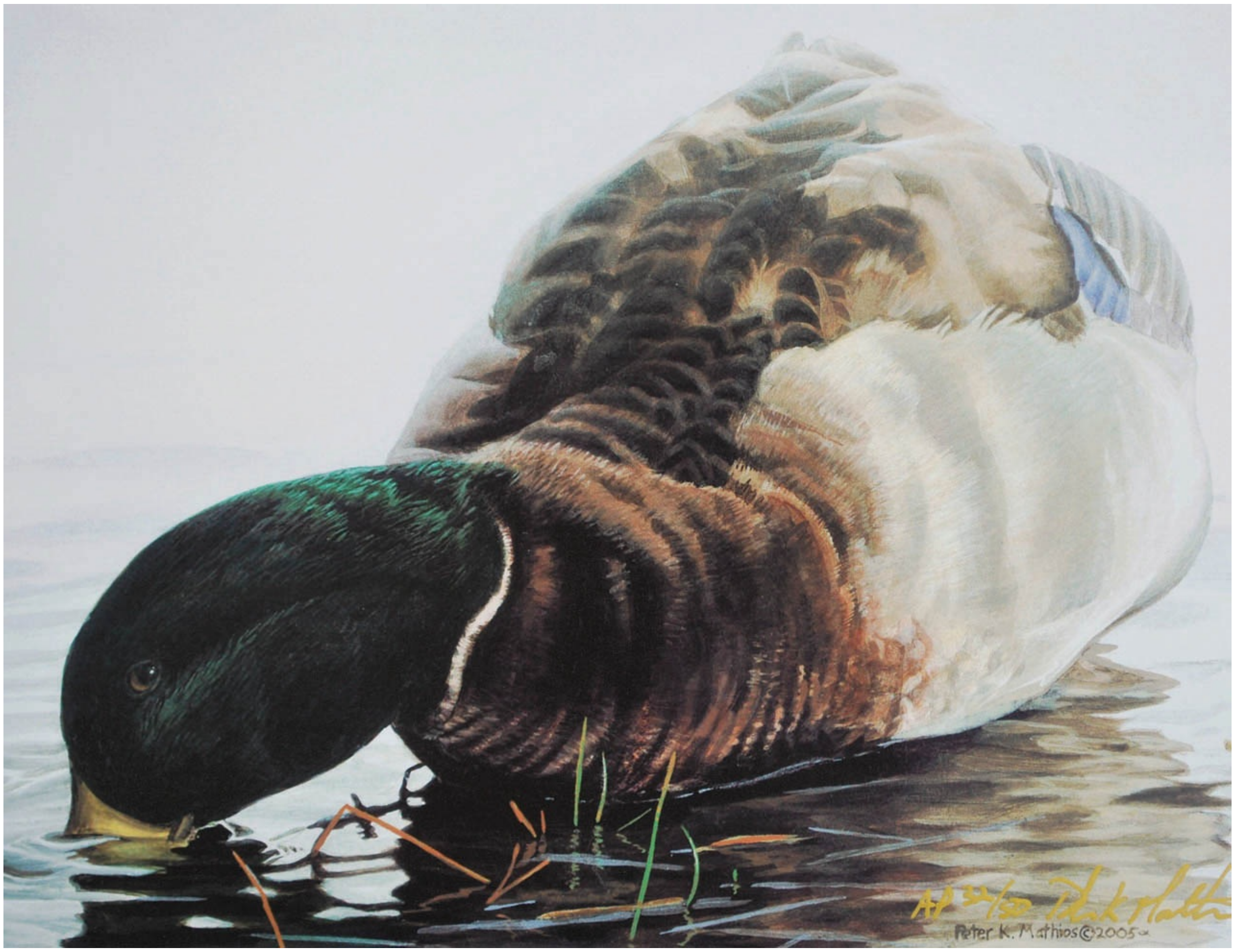
Although there are many different species of duck across the world, each with its own specialities and appearance, they share similar outward characteristics and for the purposes of drawing them we can use the mallard, or its domesticated form, the farmyard duck, as a model. Ducks have barrel-shaped bodies and long necks, which are often tucked in and inconspicuous until the bird starts to feed, or fly. The arrangement of the duck's neck and head can cause many draughting problems. The back end of a duck is generally conical and quite muscular. Pay attention to the rear end of a duck when drawing it – it helps to describe motion and balance.



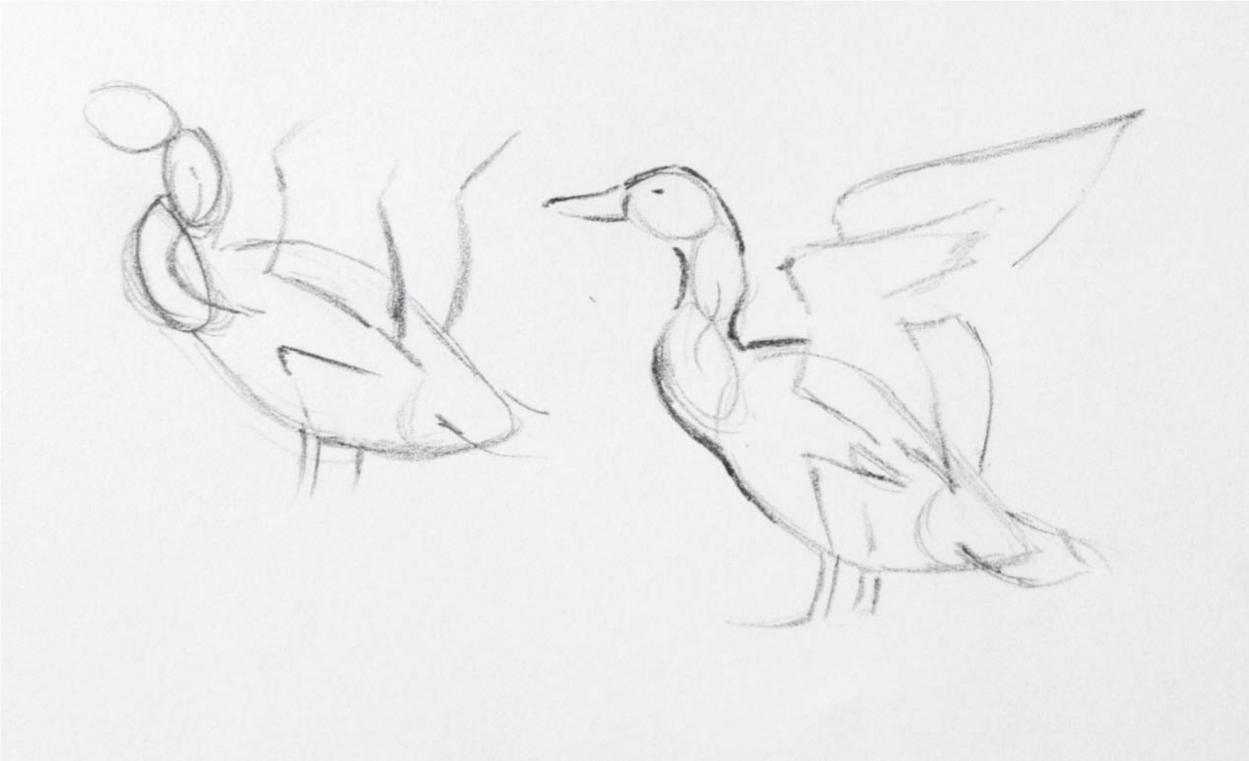
Tim Wootton: a duck’s skeleton is stocky and robust. The neck is long and dextrous.

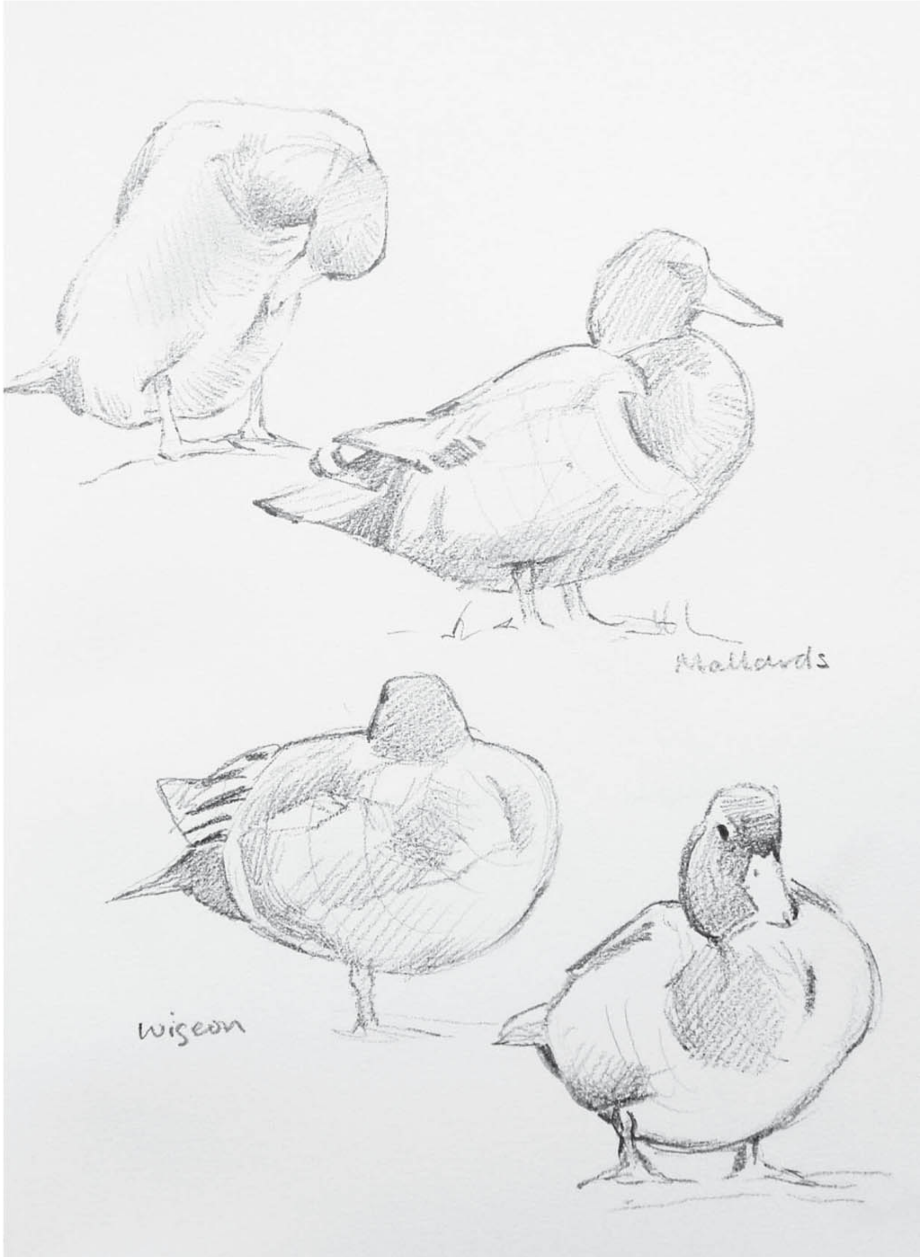


Tim Wootton: a group of eiders (three drakes and one duck). Note the half-open wings on the three birds nearest; the distant bird has its wings covered by flank and scapular feathers.


AP 32/50
Peter K. Mathios©2005

Peter Mathios: mallard drake. Structure and softness – the artist accentuates the natural contours around the bird to describe the solidity and roundness of the form. Typically much of the wing is hidden.

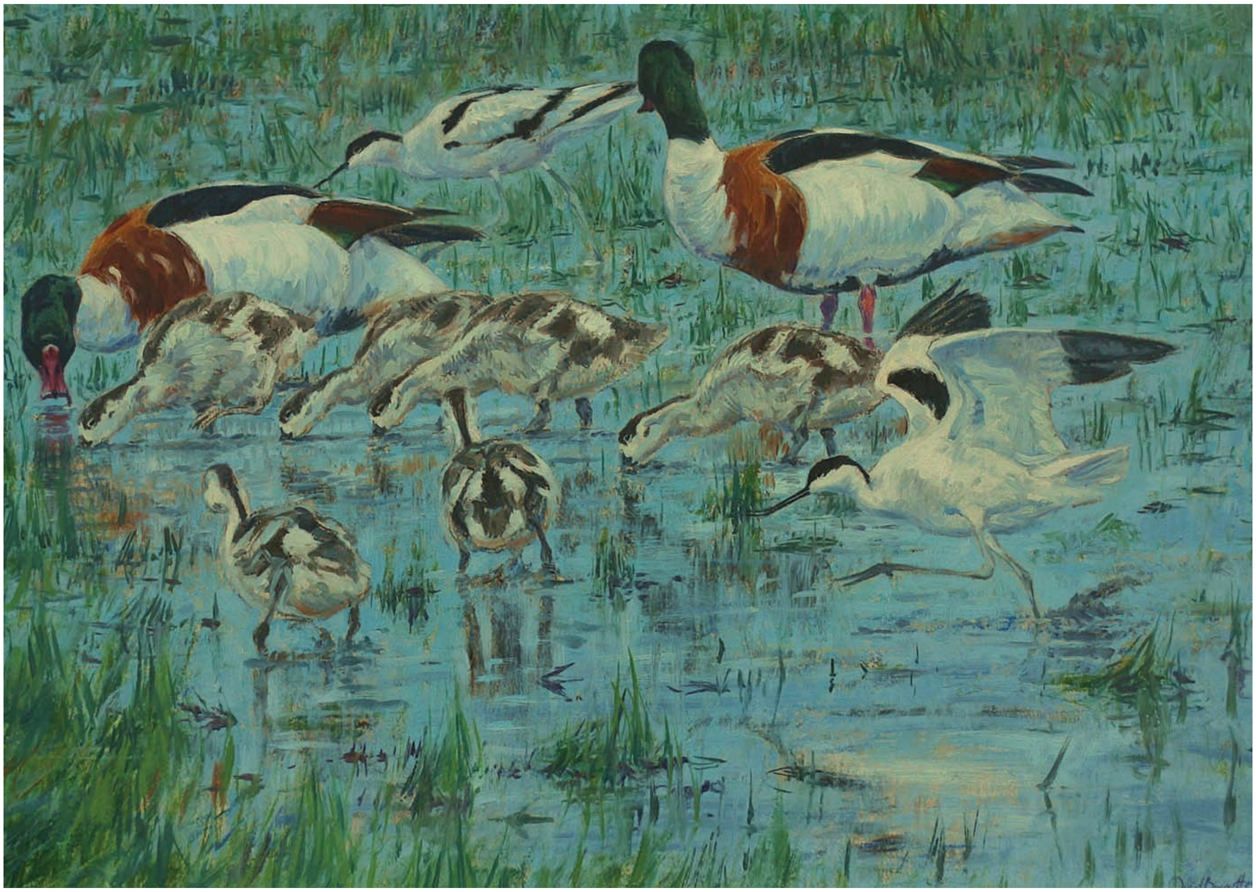




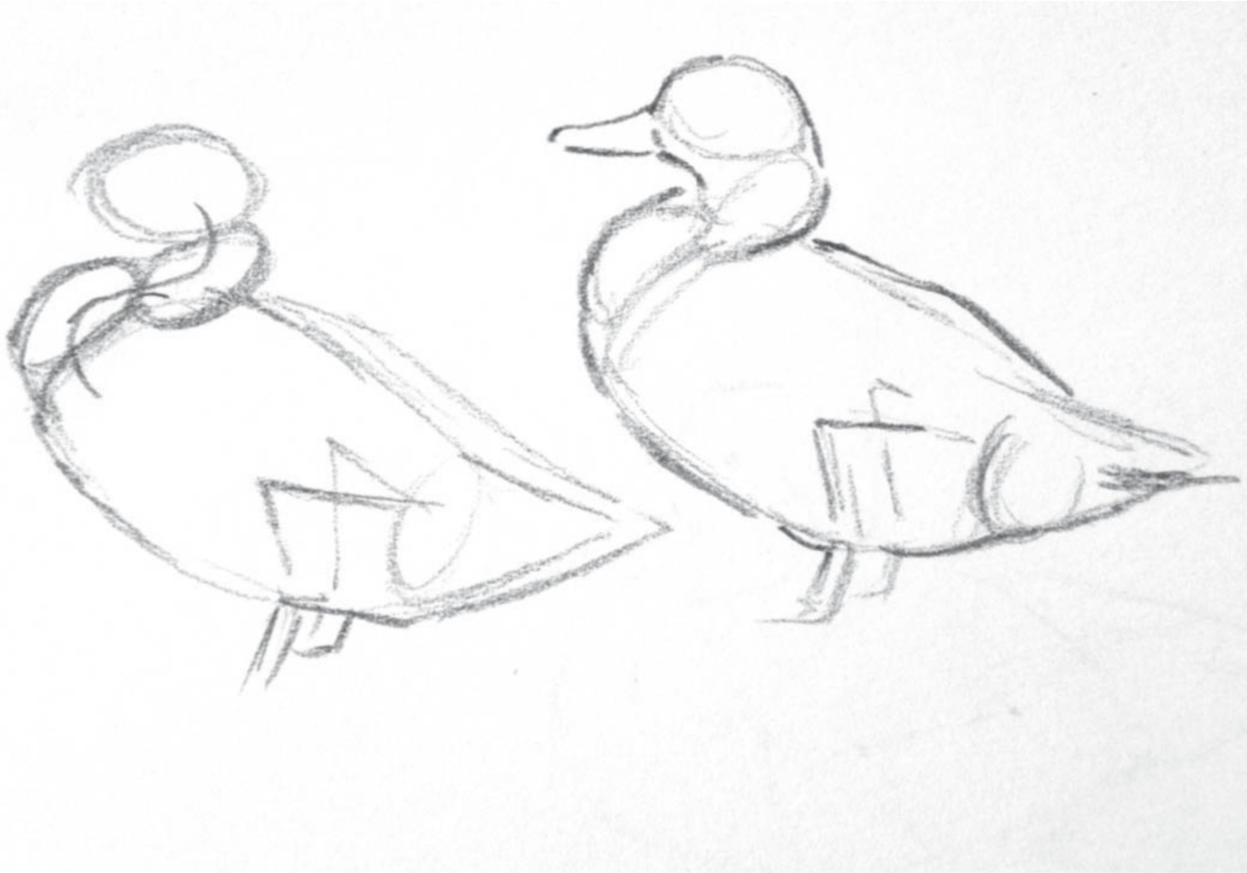
Tim Wootton: duck posture, neck shapes and angles.

When on the ground or swimming, a duck's wings are usually tucked away out of sight, hidden behind flank feathers and scapulars. Often all that can be seen is the speculum (the brightly coloured patch of secondary feathers) and the primaries (wing tips). In some diving ducks, however (eiders), the wings are regularly obvious because they remain slightly open between each dive. They use their wings to propel themselves under the water.

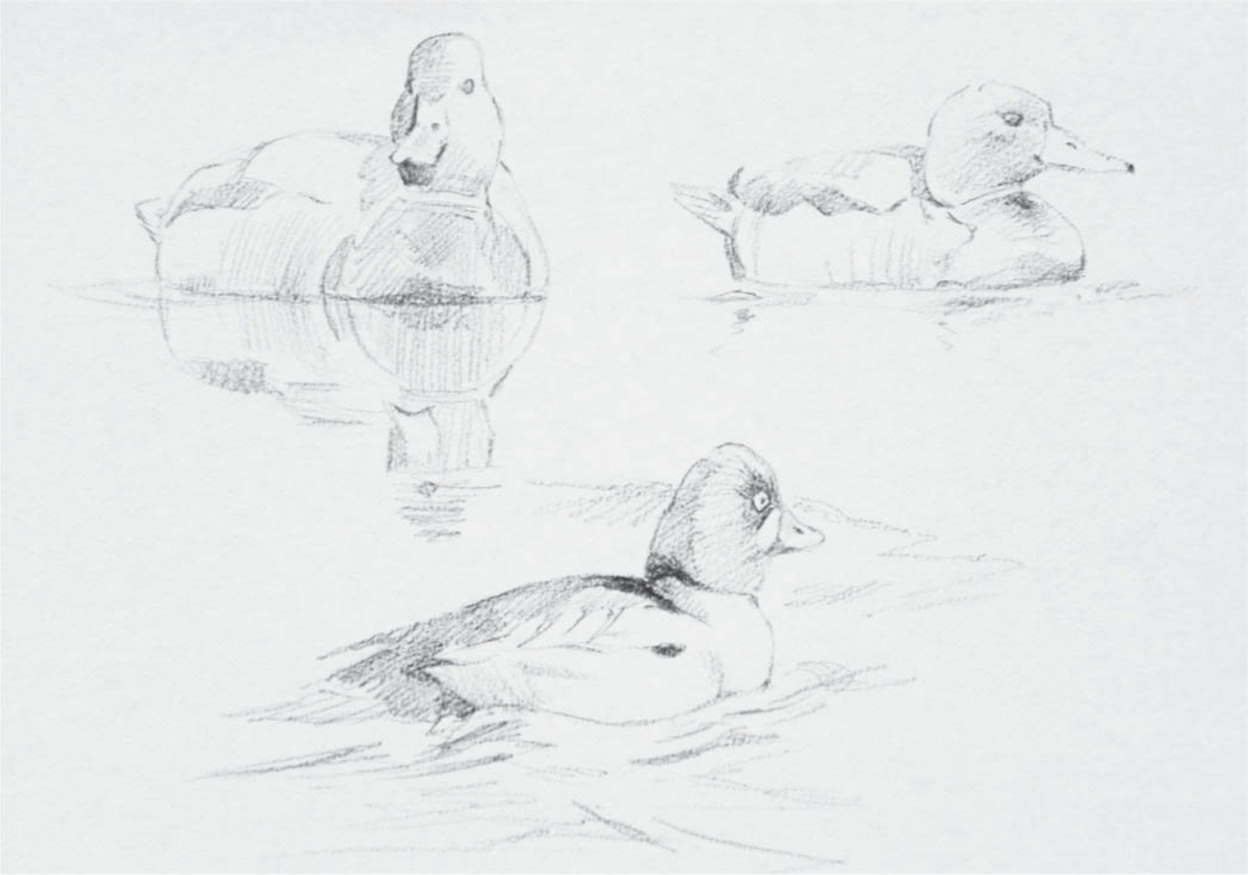
When observing ducks on dry land, note the depth of the birds' bodies and how rounded they are. Look also at the position of a duck's head when resting: the neck is folded back, extending the bird's body to the front and the head is about a third of the way back.



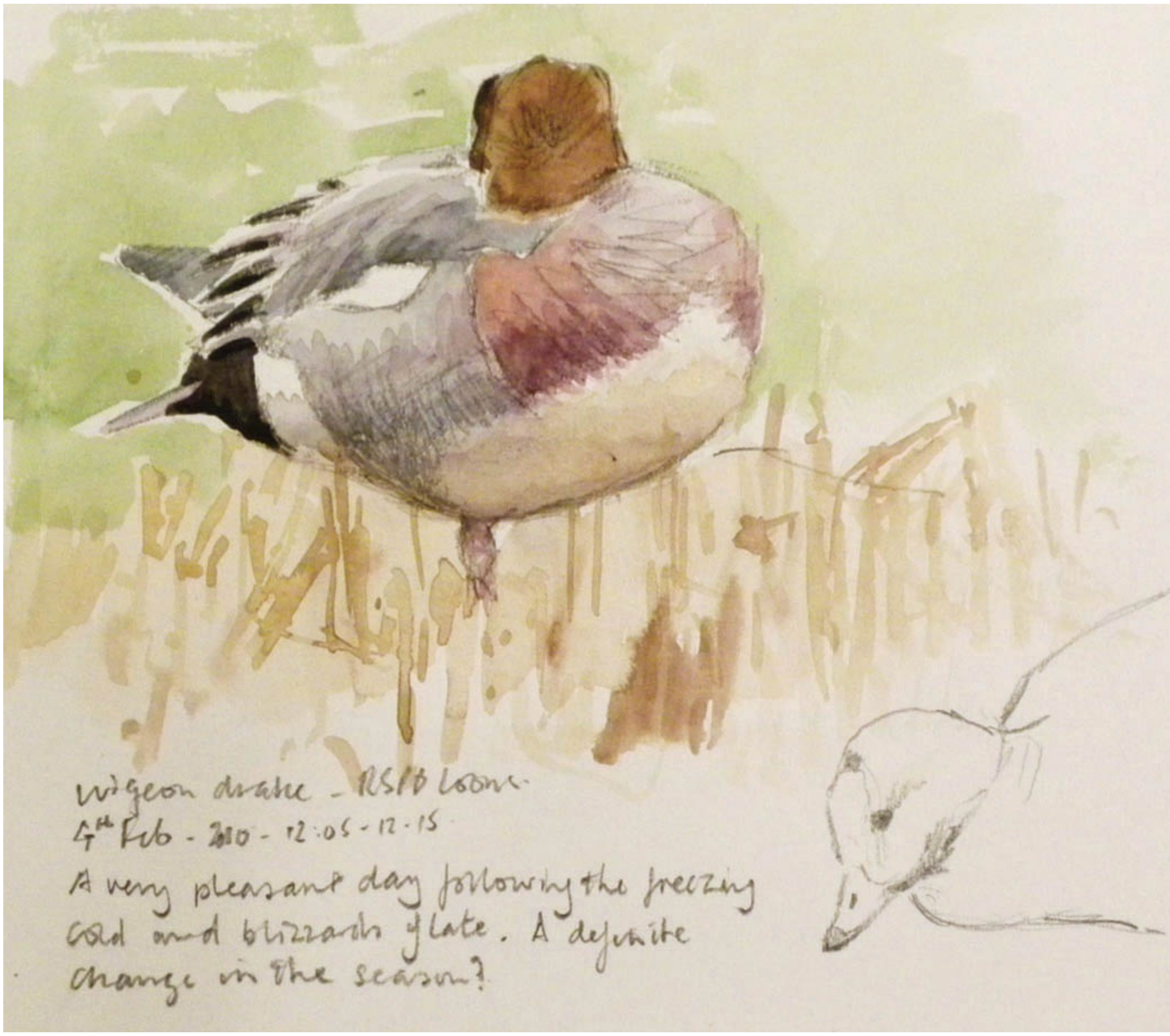
David Bennett: shelduck family and avocets.



A duck – construction drawings.

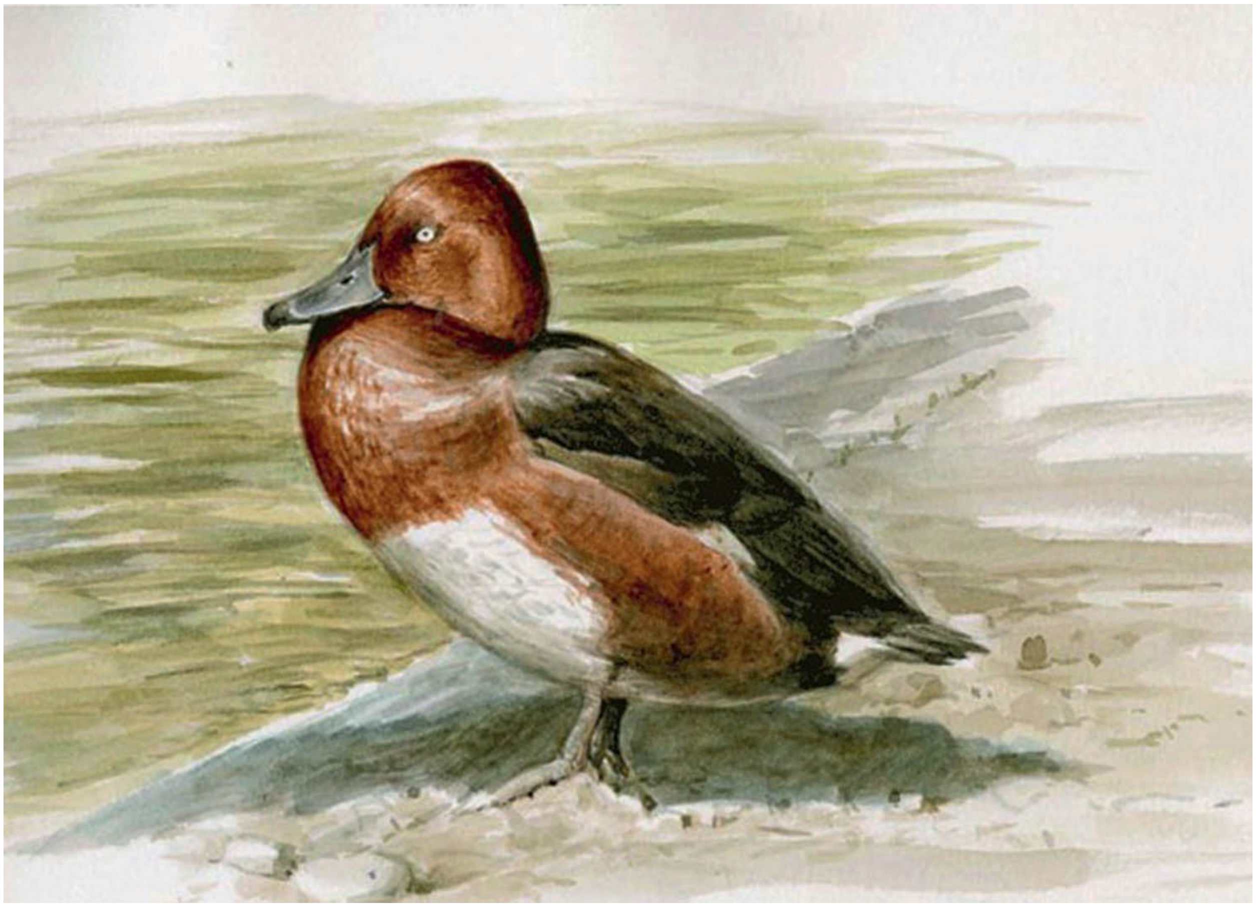


Tim Wootton: swimming ducks.



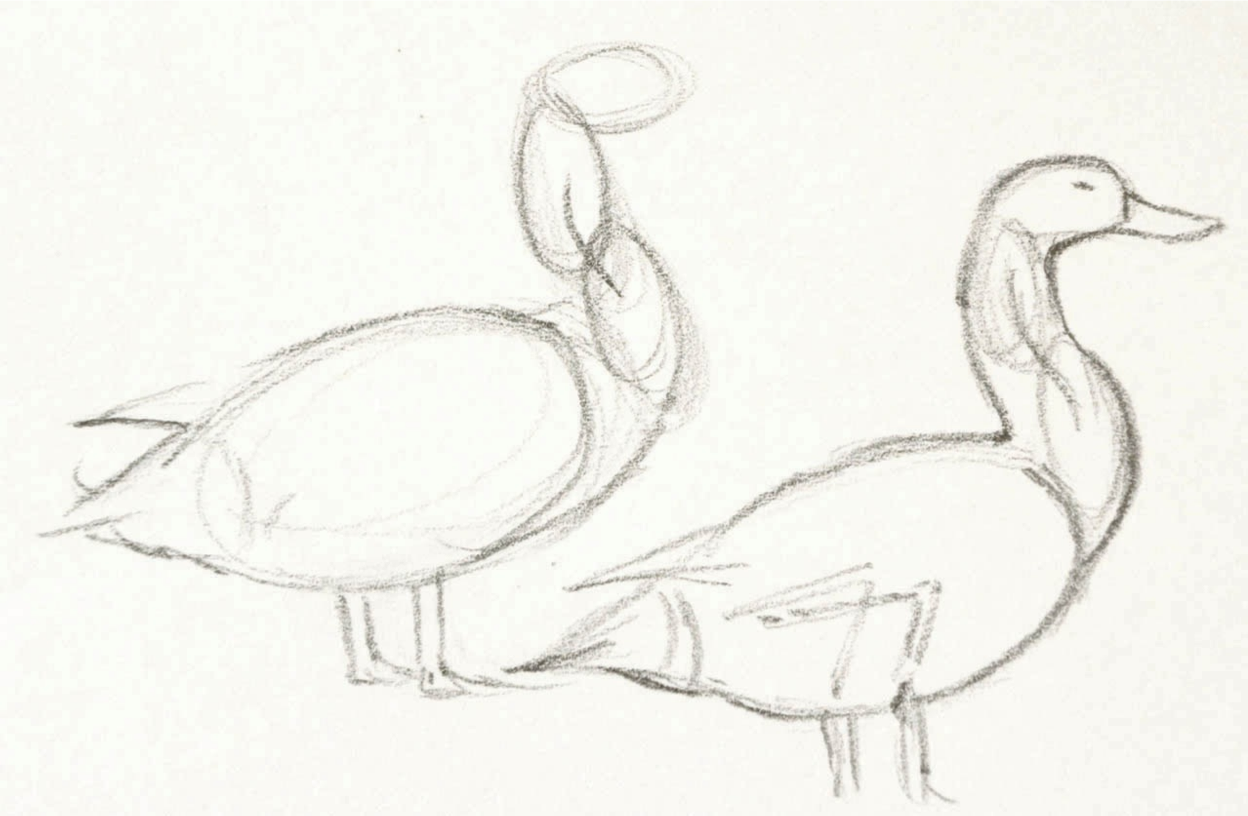
wigeon drake – RSPB Loons.
4th Feb – 2010 – 12:05 – 12.15
A very pleasant day following the freezing
cold and blizzards of late. A definite
change in the season?

Tim Wootton: drake wigeon at rest.



Paschalis Dougalis: ferruginous duck.

A duck's head doesn't sit right at the front of its body; always look for that point of balance. Compare this with the swimming birds; imagine how much or little of the bird there is underwater. Ducks have a slightly flattish belly which helps with buoyancy. Their feathers are perfectly waterproof and this often shows as a slight gloss (particularly after diving or swimming), so there will be reflected and direct highlights to contend with and render.

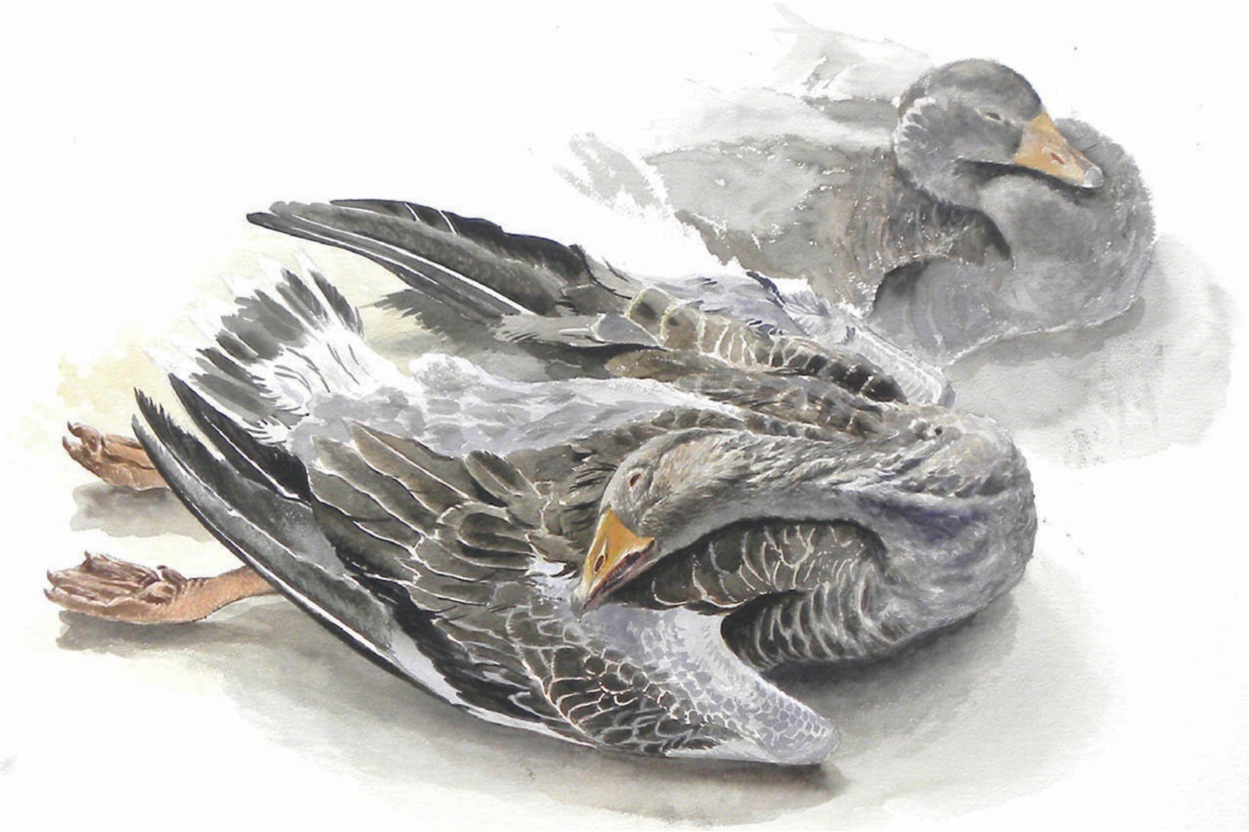


Tim Wootton: ducks.

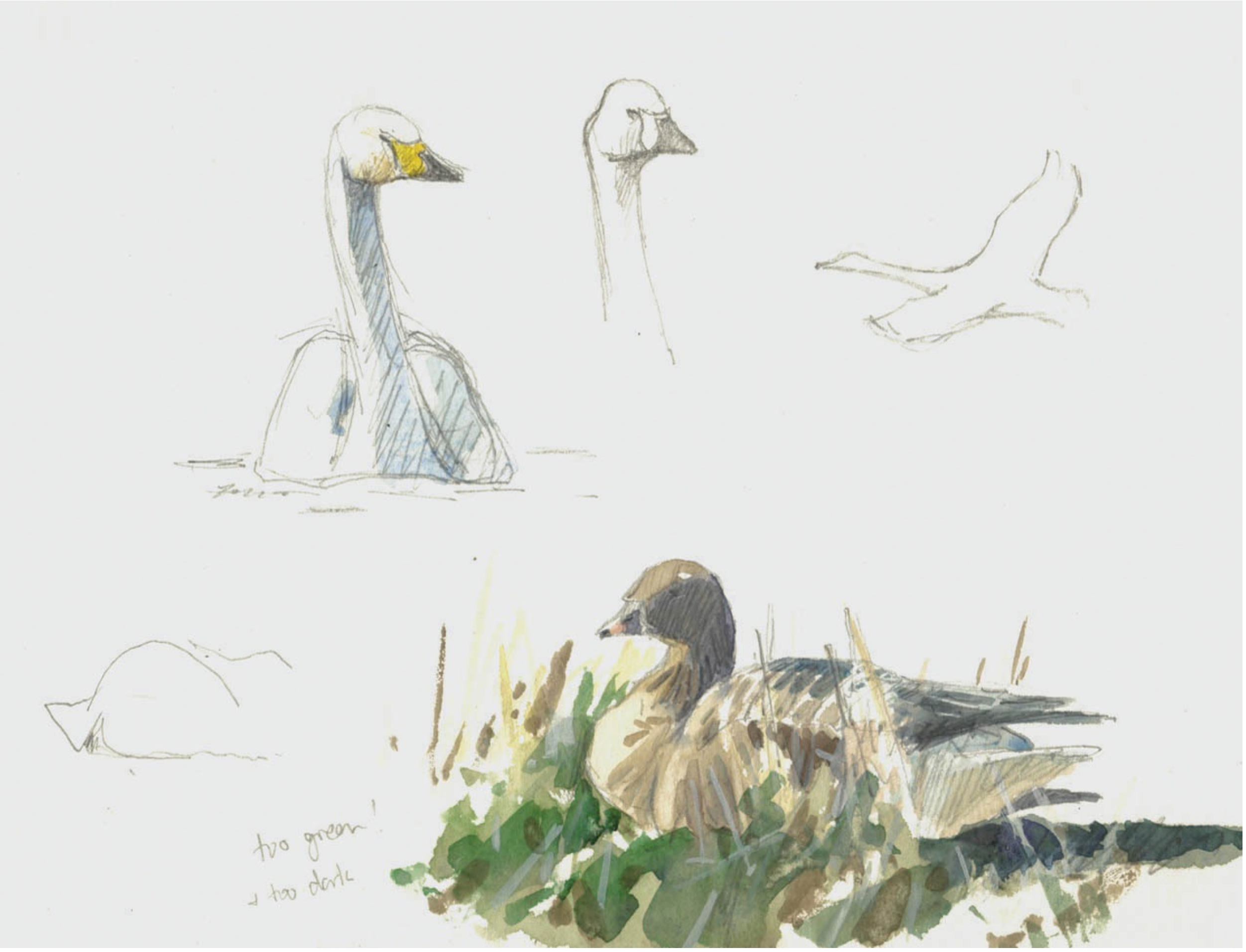
GEESE AND SWANS

Geese and swans can be fairly approachable, particularly on ornamental lakes and in wildfowl collections. They are wonderful subjects when you are starting out drawing birds from life because of this, and because their physical structures are reasonably easy to see and understand.

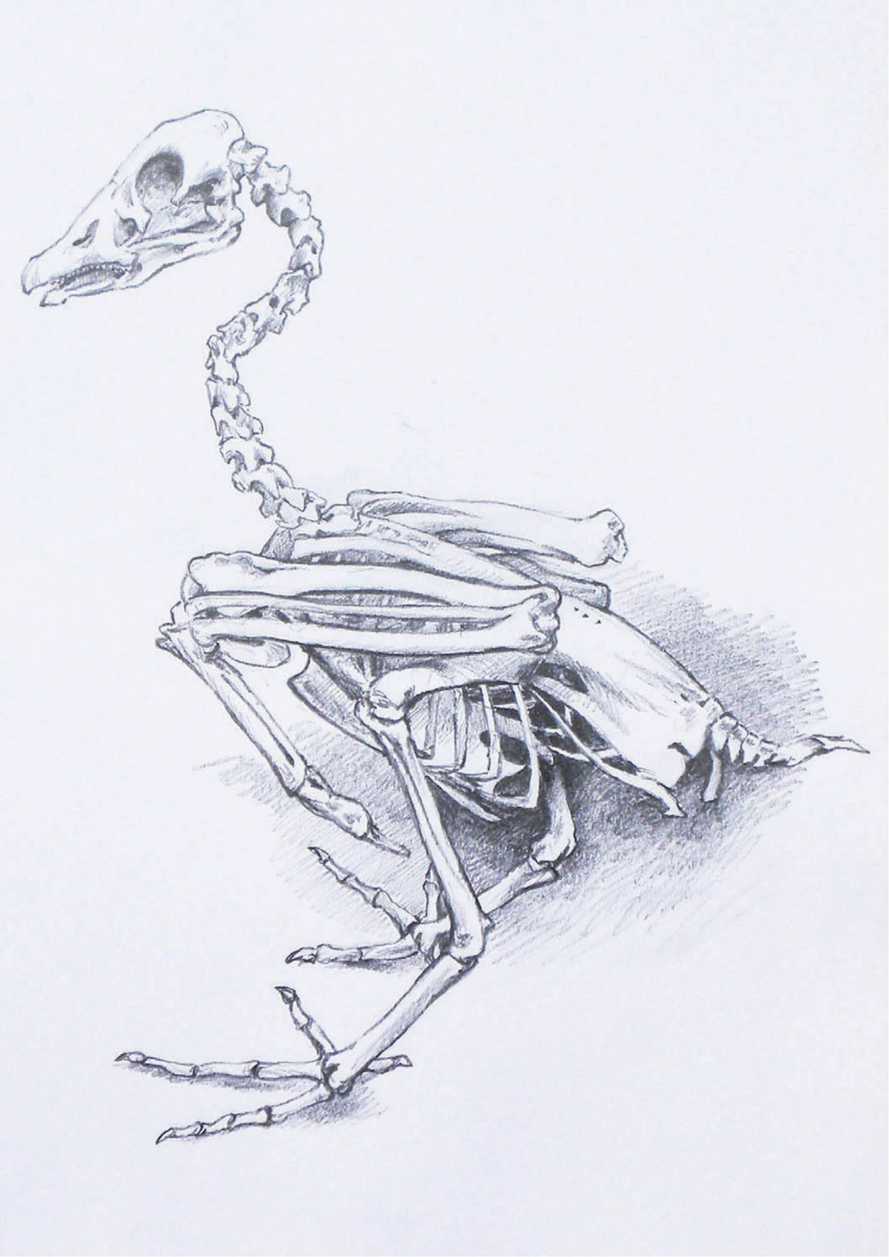
Generally they have lozenge-shaped bodies with long, slim necks. They have large wings (to support their weight), which are visible on the bird in the field – both geese and swans show large secondary feathers when at rest. Many geese have a scalloped effect across their upper backs and breasts, formed by differently coloured edges to the feathers in these areas. When drawing them, use these features to assist in unravelling the complexities of their form.



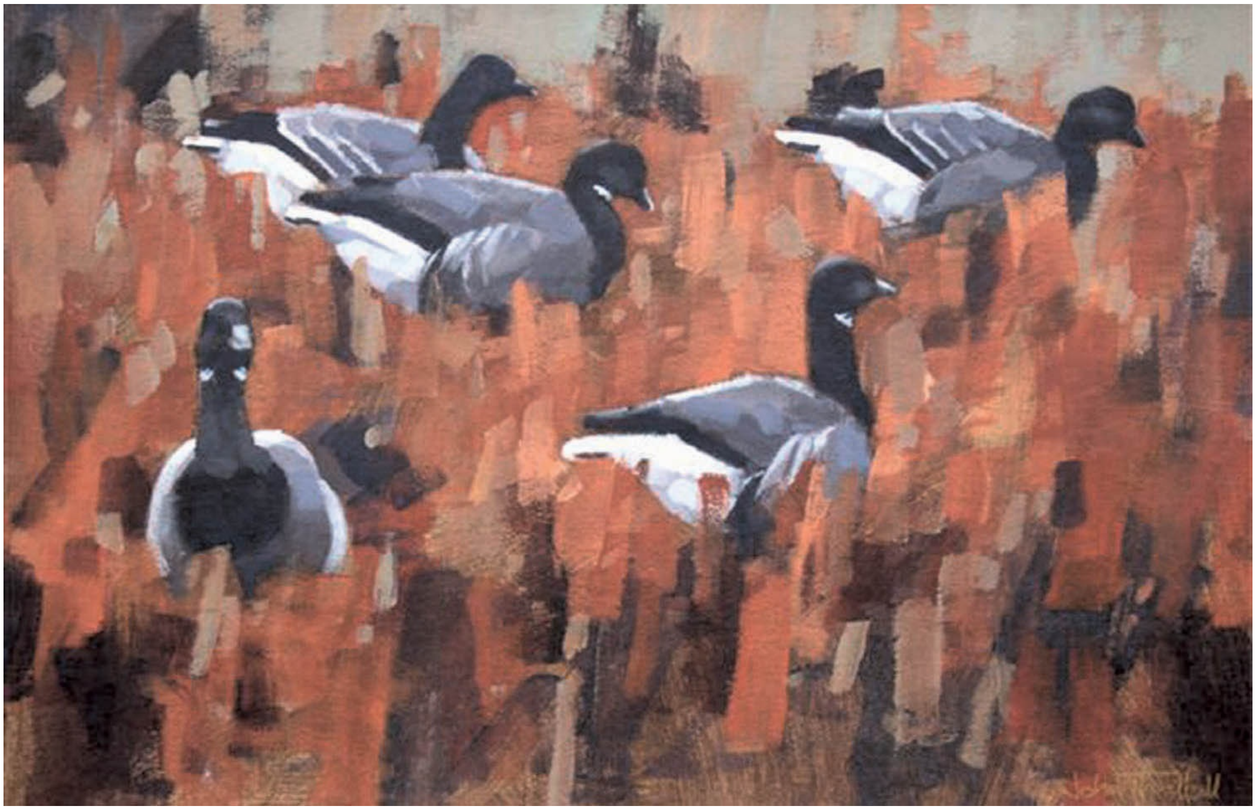
Tim Wootton: greylag goose post-mortem study.


too green!
+ too dark

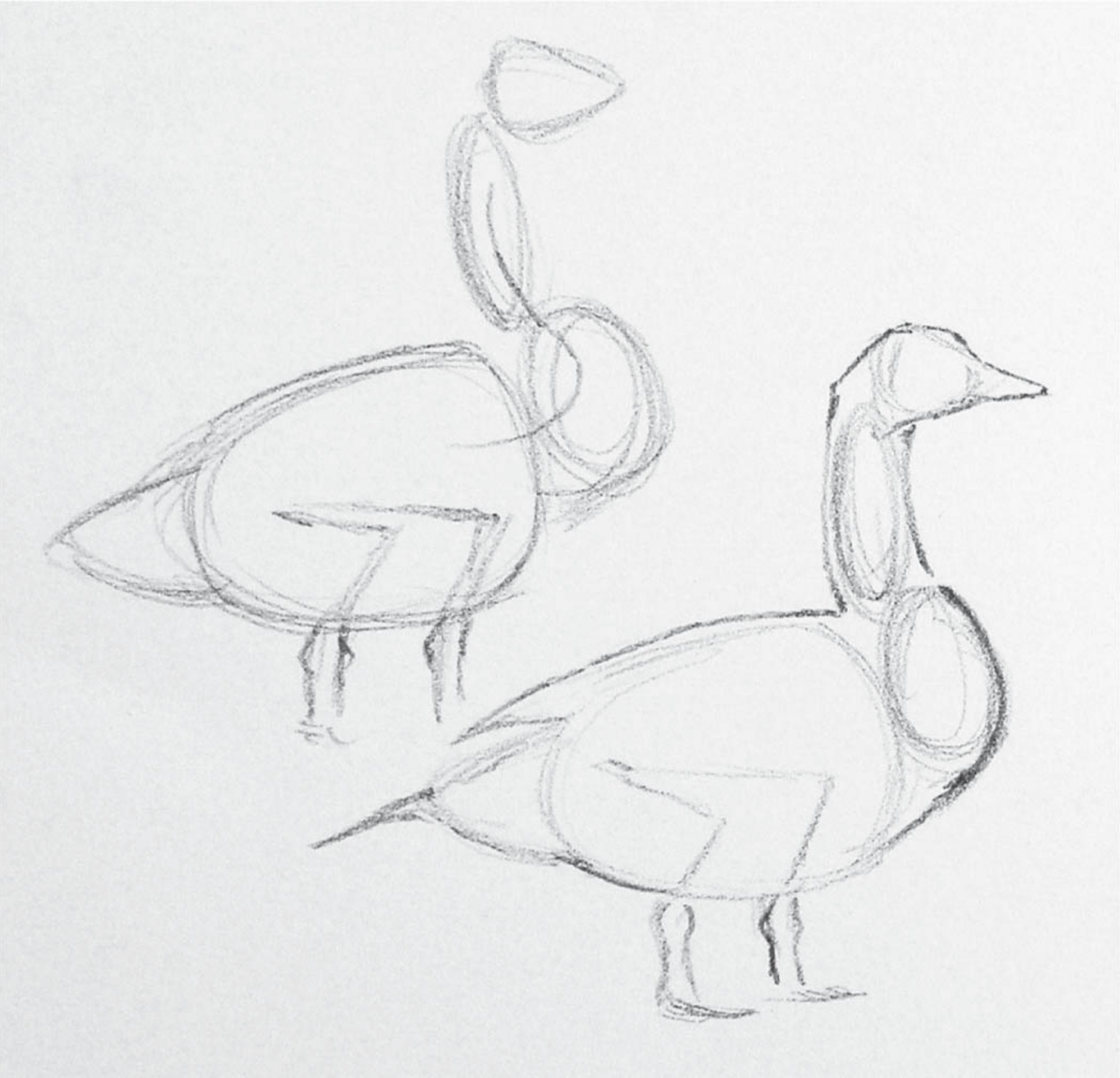
John Threlfall: whooper swan and pink-footed goose.

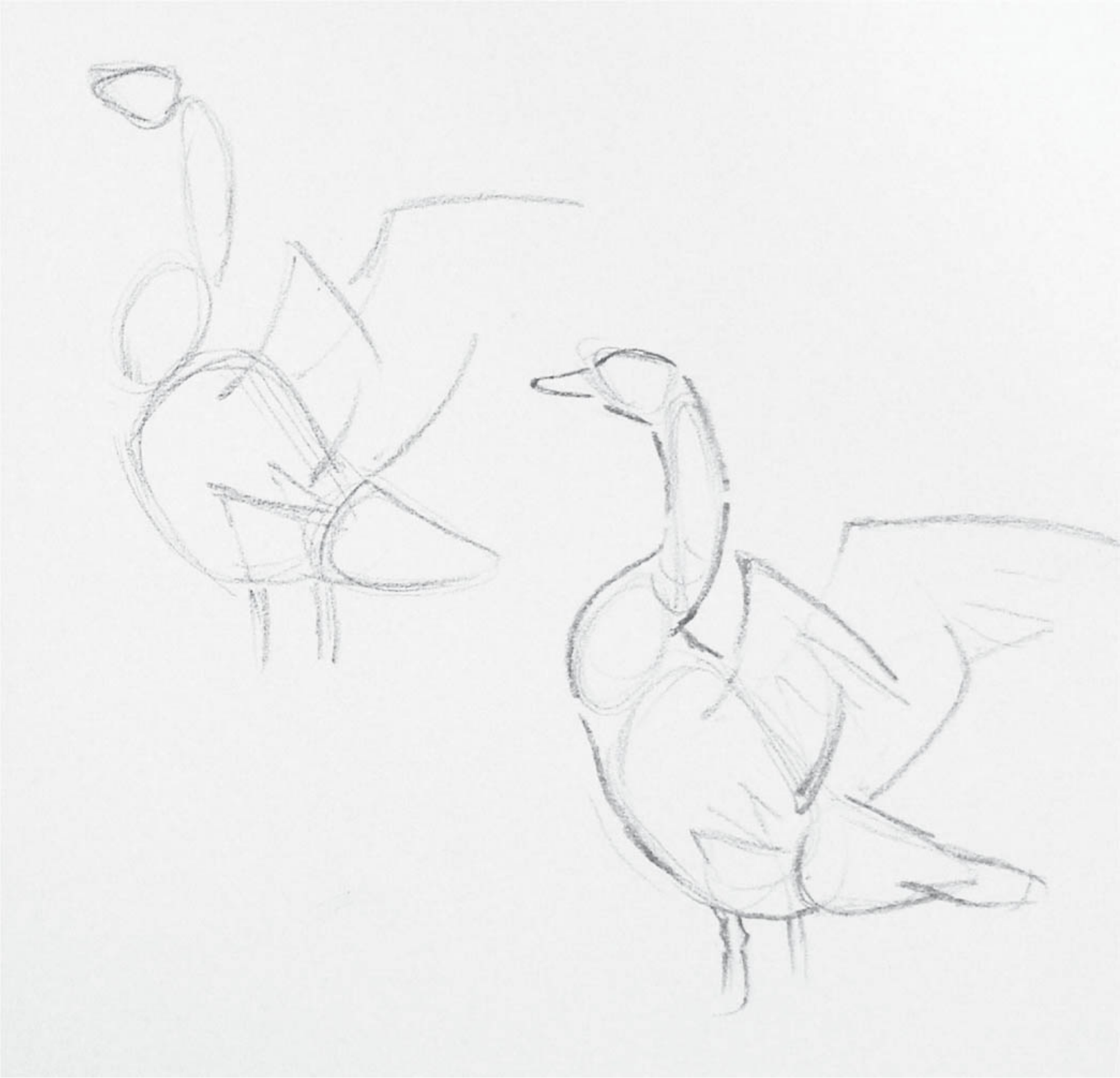


Tim Wootton: goose skeleton.

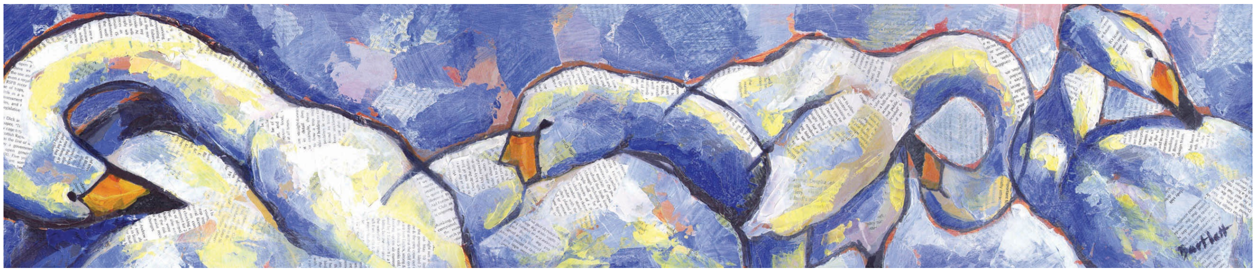


John Threlfall: Brent geese.

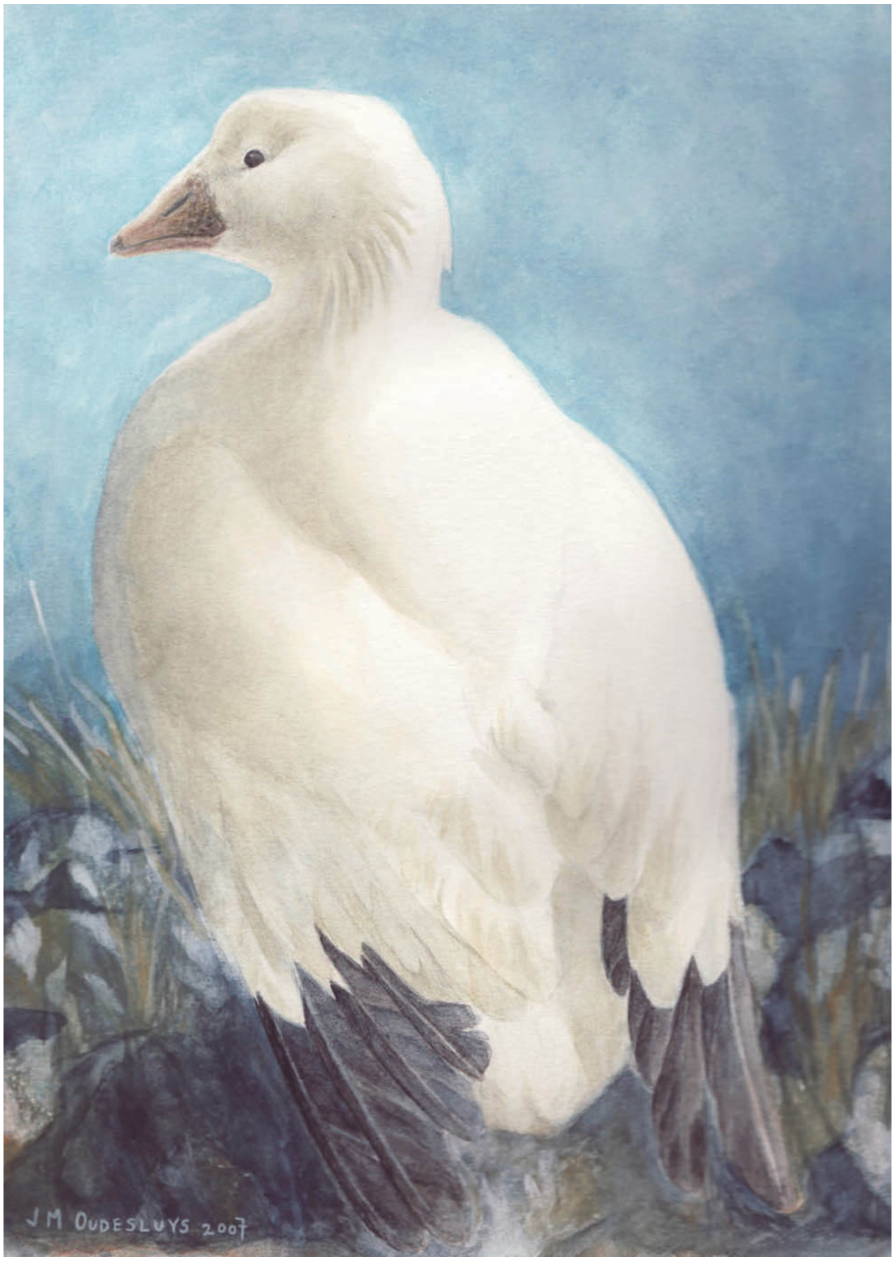




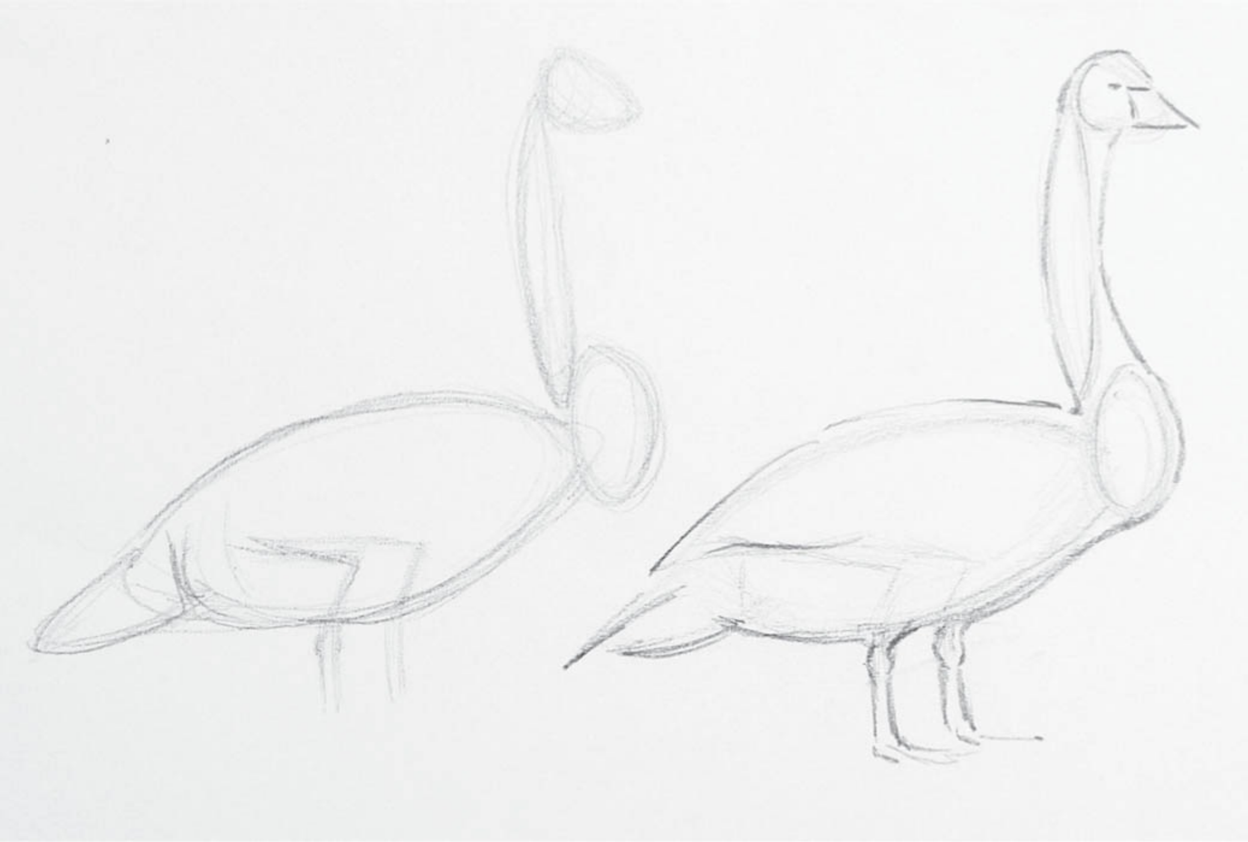
Tim Wootton: geese.



Paul Bartlett: swans.


J M OUDESLUYS 2007

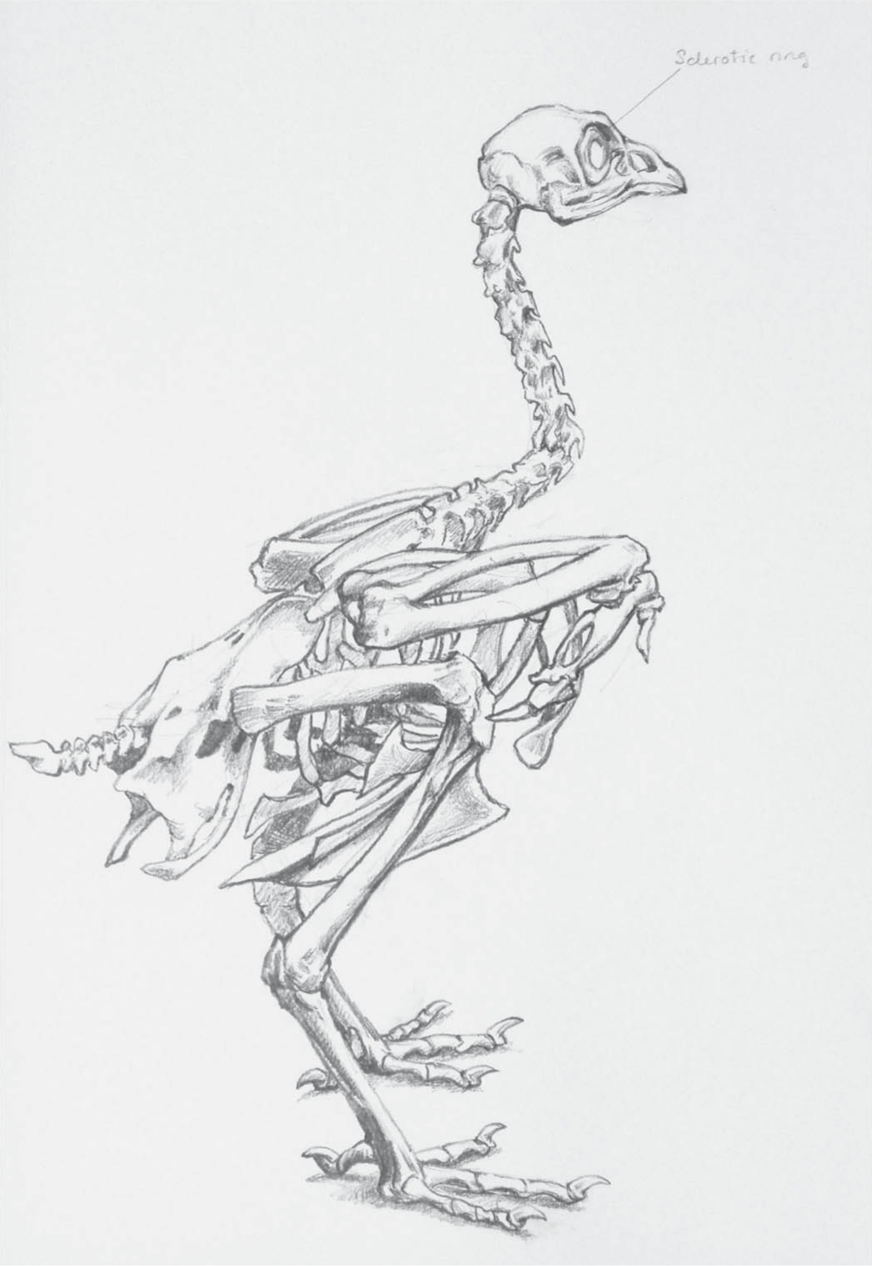
Jocelyn Oudesluys: Ross’s goose.



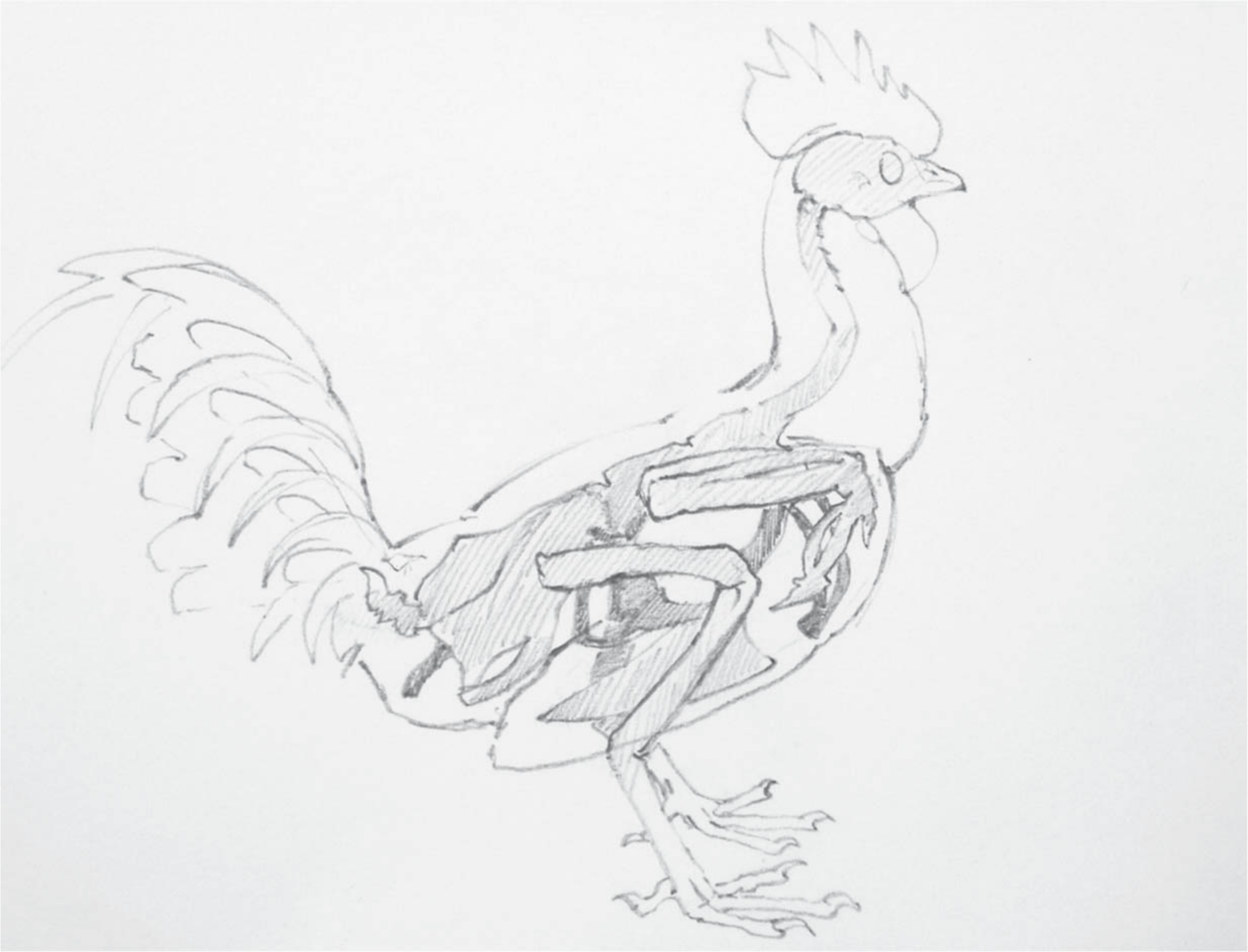
Tim Wootton: swans.

DOMESTIC FOWL AND THEIR RELATIVES

Perhaps the best known of all birds, the farmyard chicken is derived from the jungle fowl of Asia. In some domestic breeds, their native ancestry is evident in both plumage and behaviour. Relatives, allies and similarly structured birds include the pheasant, grouse, partridge, quail and turkey. Getting to know how to draw the domestic chicken will prepare you for many of the shapes and movements you will come across in lots of wild birds. Besides learning to draw them, watching hens will reveal the way a bird’s plumage functions and what they do to keep it in good working order. Cock game birds have a variety of ruffs and hackles adorning their heads and necks and quite often have areas of colourful bare skin on their faces and crowns. The feather masses are well defined and they respond to threat and other environmental stimuli as would wild birds; therefore you will see them scratch and peck, fight, drink, dust-bathe, preen and eventually roost. They are superb models, not to be overlooked.

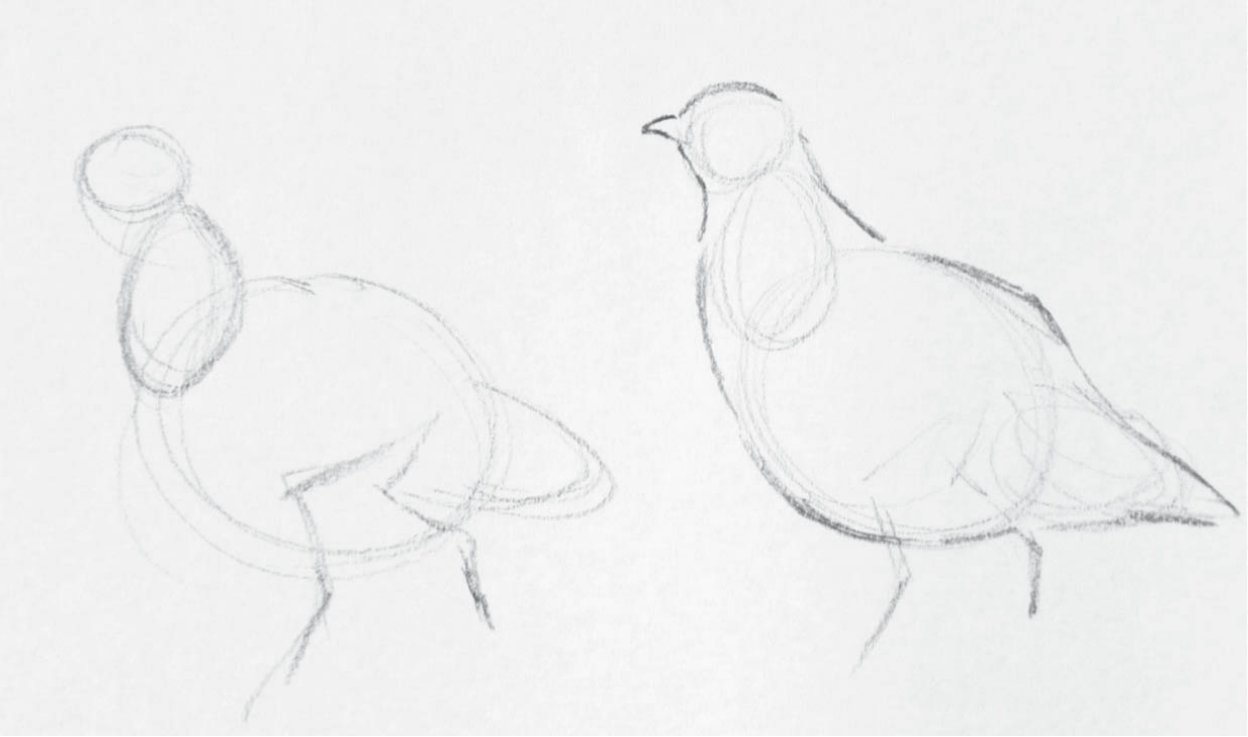


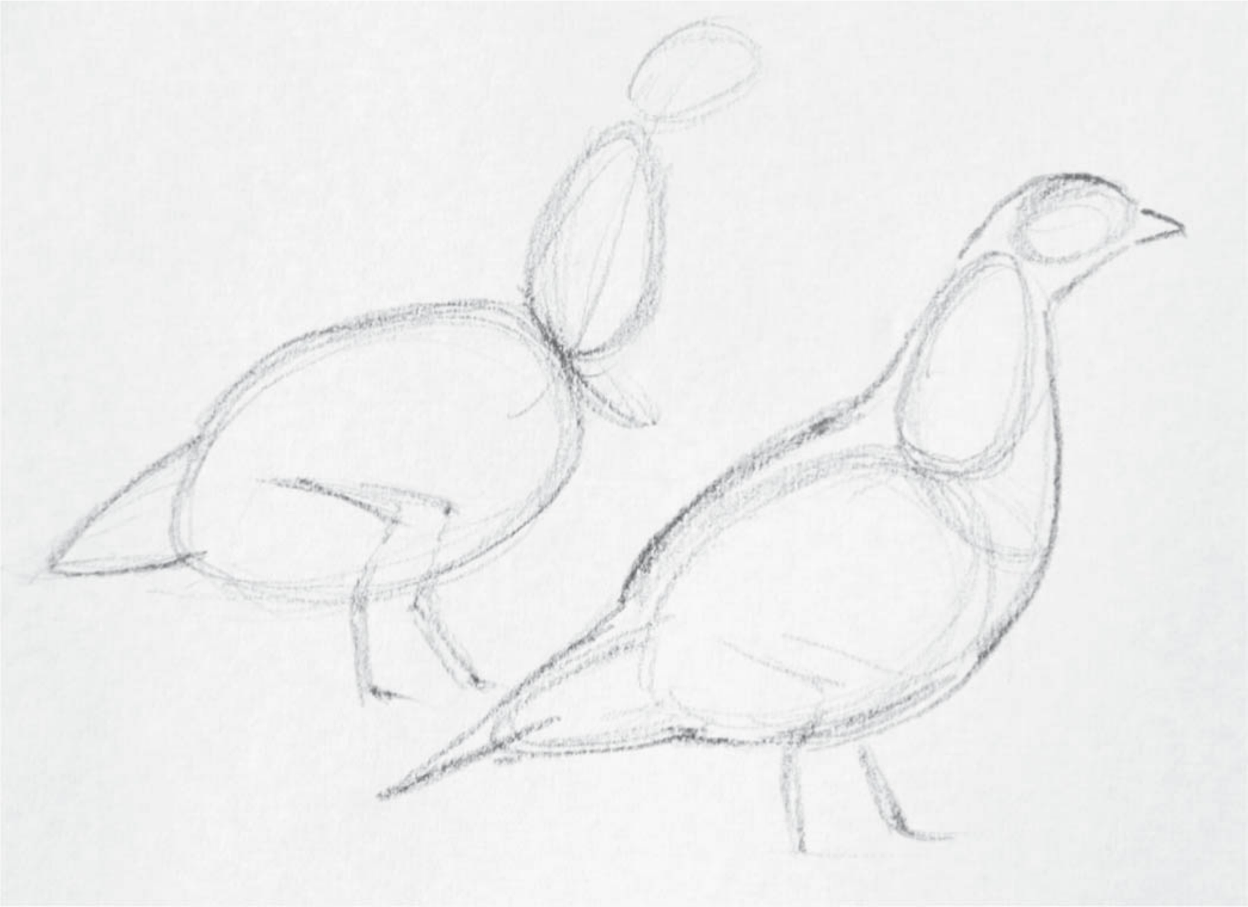
Tim Wootton: skeleton of a domestic hen.



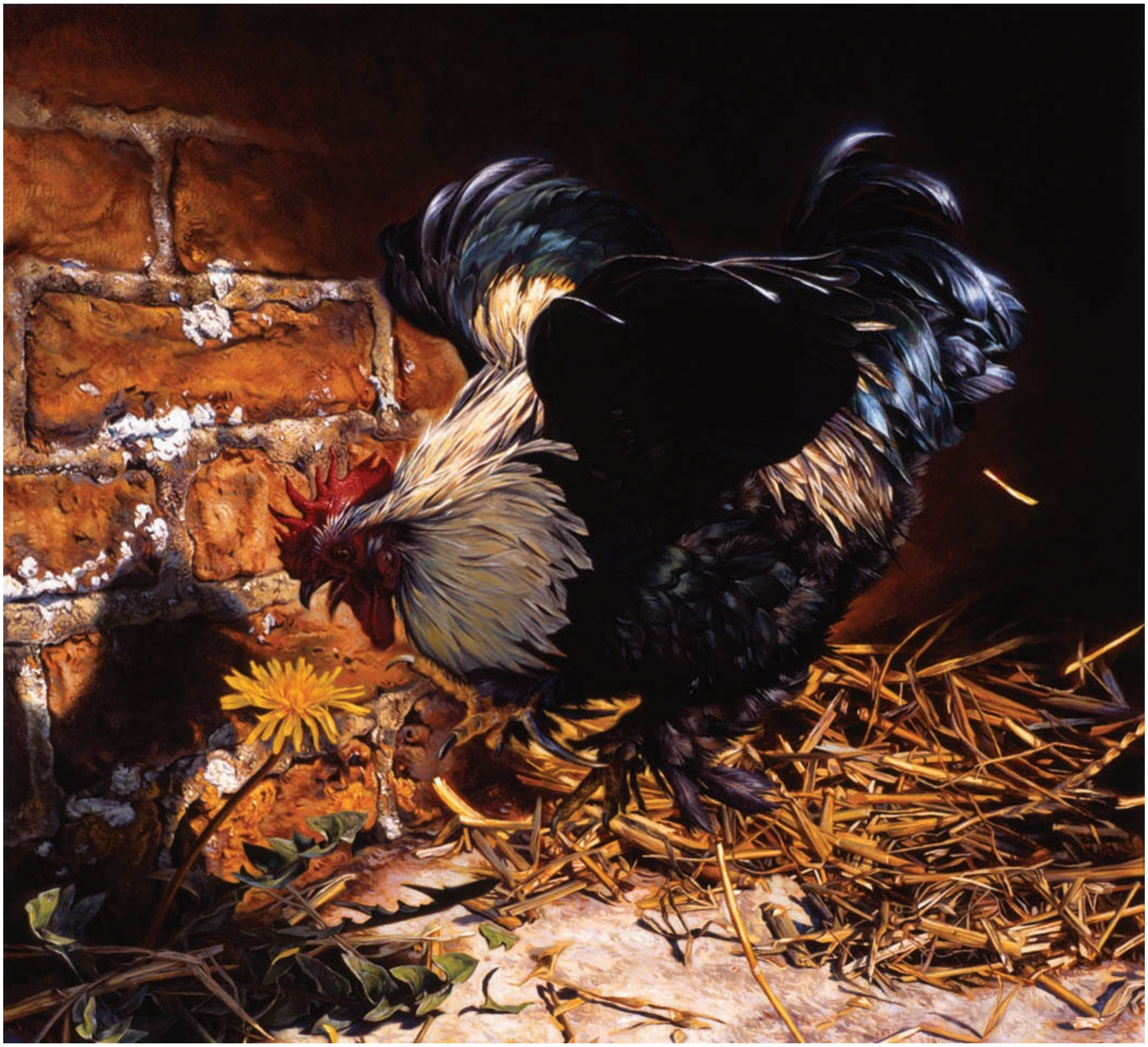
Tim Wootton: skeleton of a domestic hen with outer feather profile.

They have long, powerful legs and strong fleshy feet with quite wicked claws (the mature cockerels have vicious hind claws – ‘spurs’ – which rake the flesh when they kick). With their long necks and relatively small heads they have a distinctively reptilian expression. They are omnivorous and will catch and eat mice and voles as well as the more usual diet of seeds and berries.

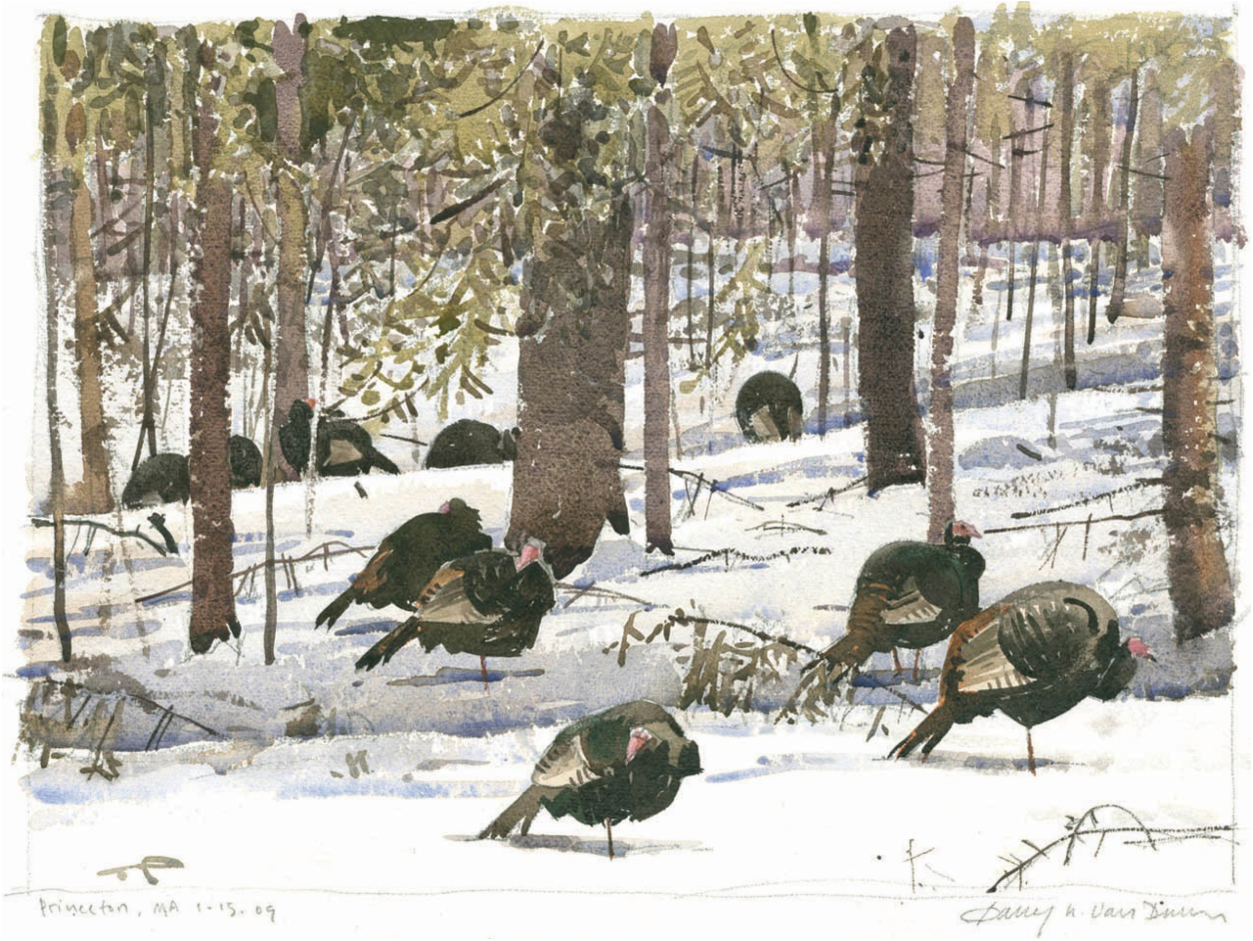




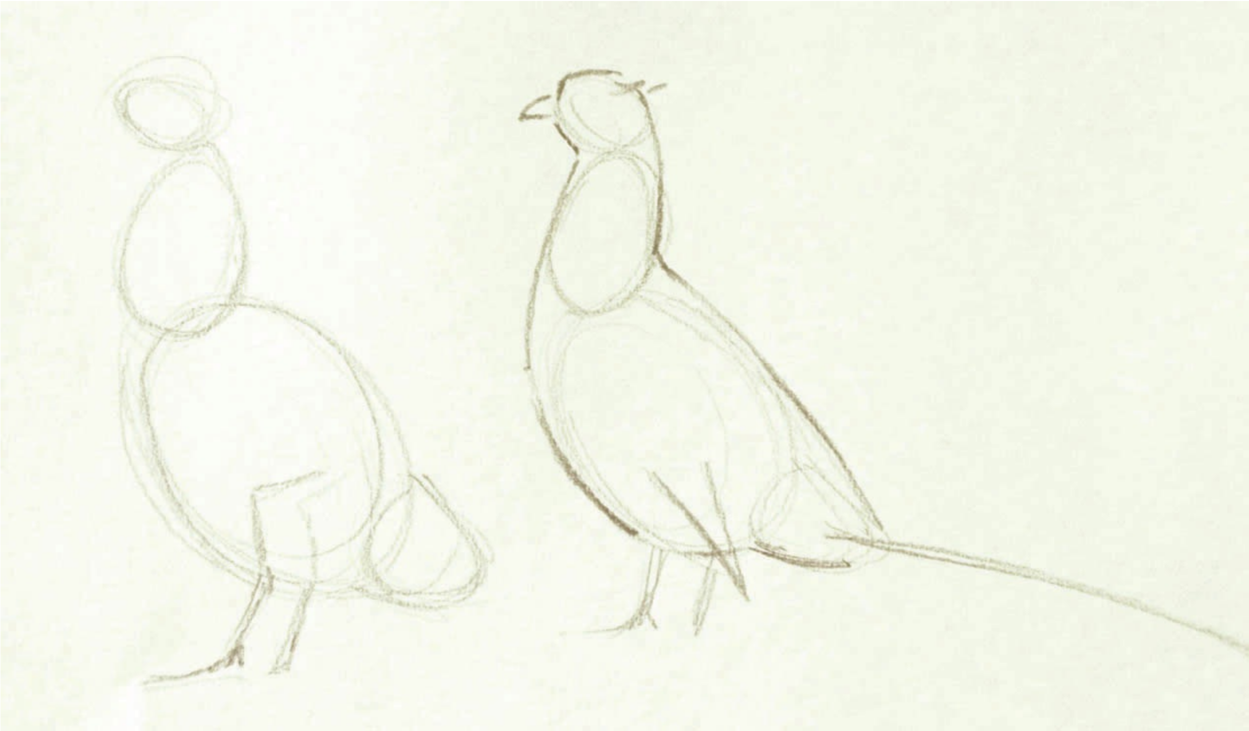
A partridge – construction drawings.



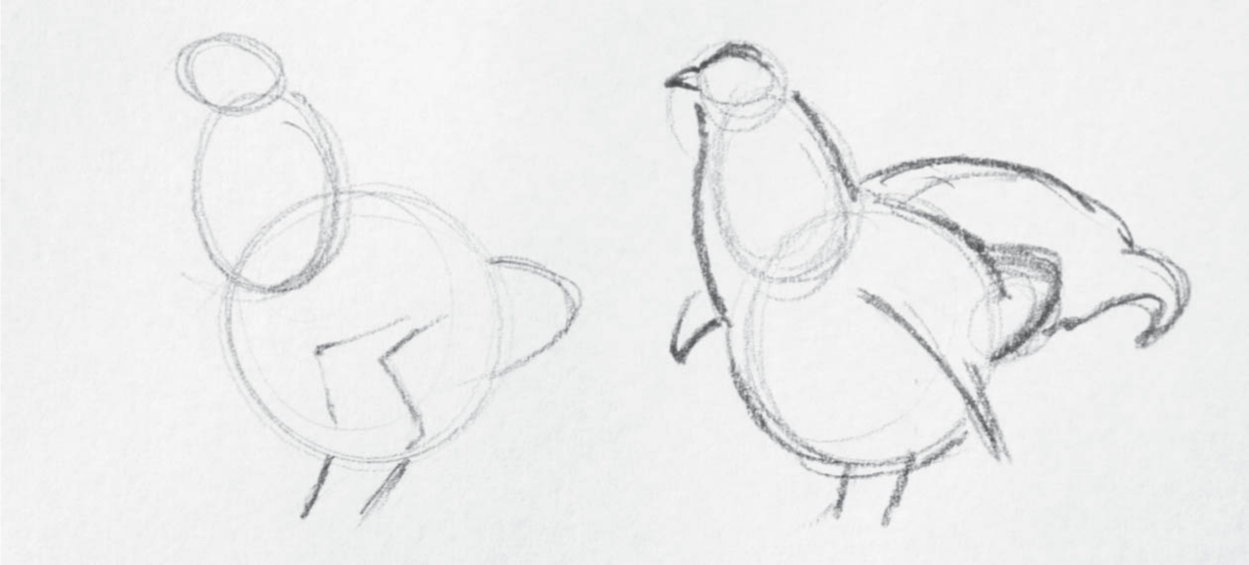
Jonathon Pointer: *Sparring with Shadows*.


Princeton, MA 1-15-09
Barry W. Van Dusen

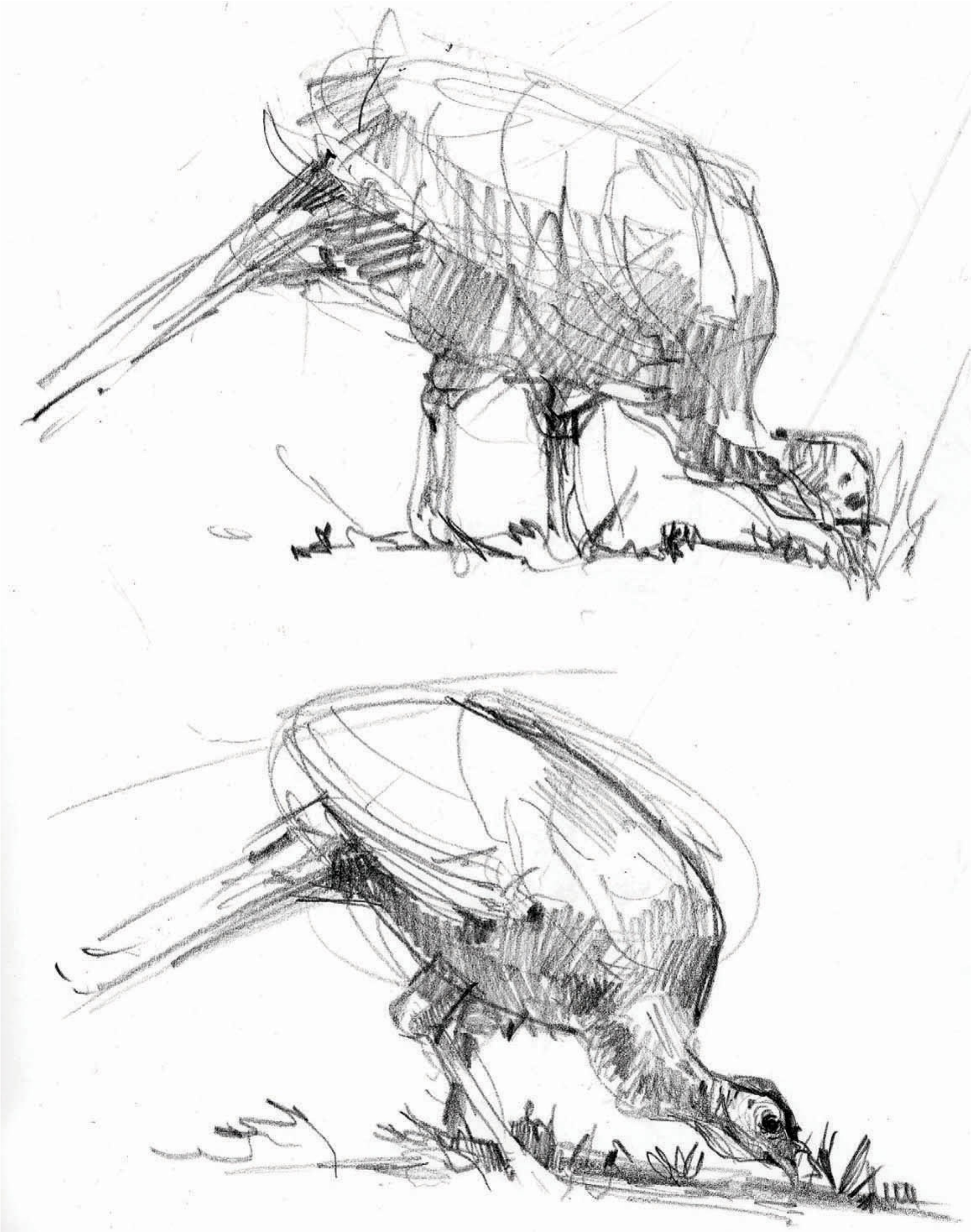
Barry Van Dusen: *Wild Turkeys from the Studio.*



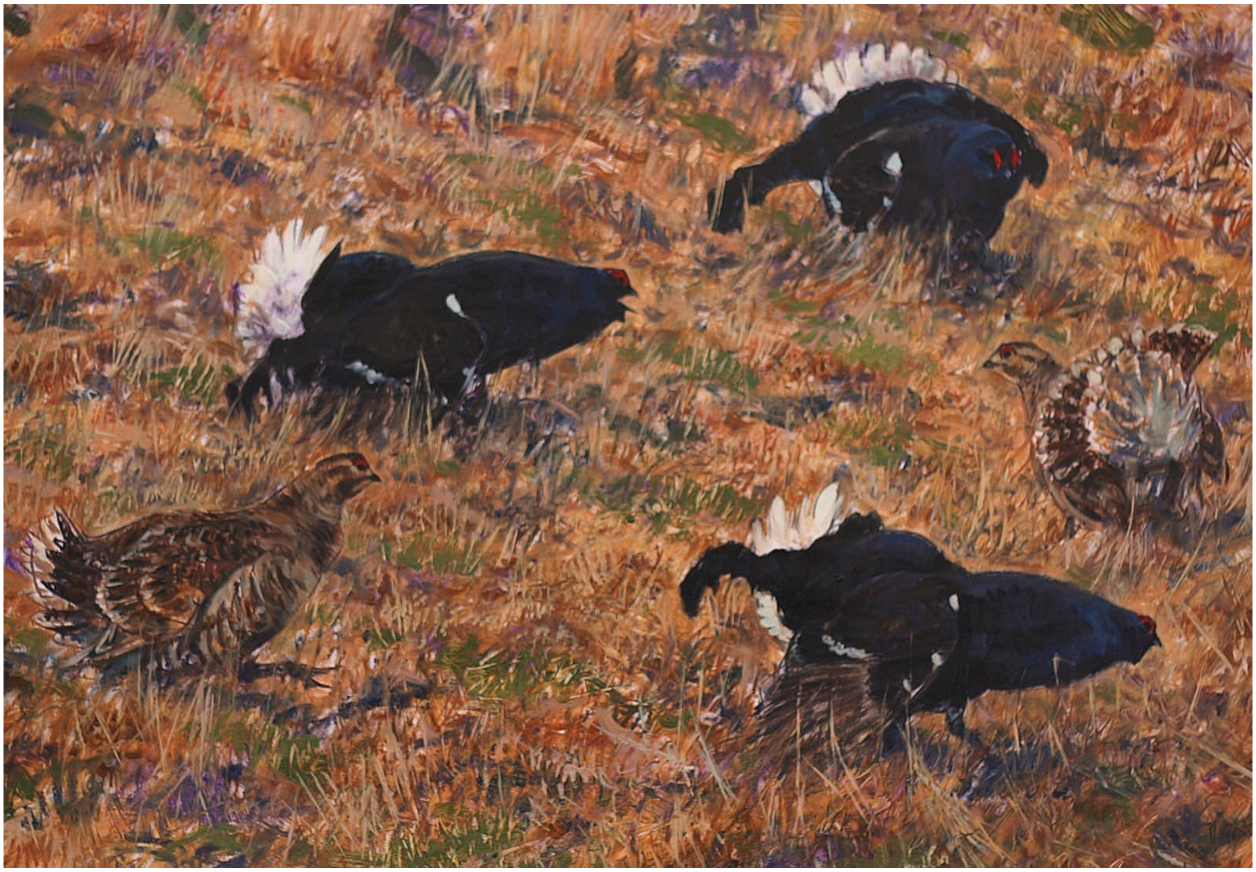
Tim Wootton: pheasant.



Tim Wootton: grouse.



Debby Kaspari: wild turkeys.

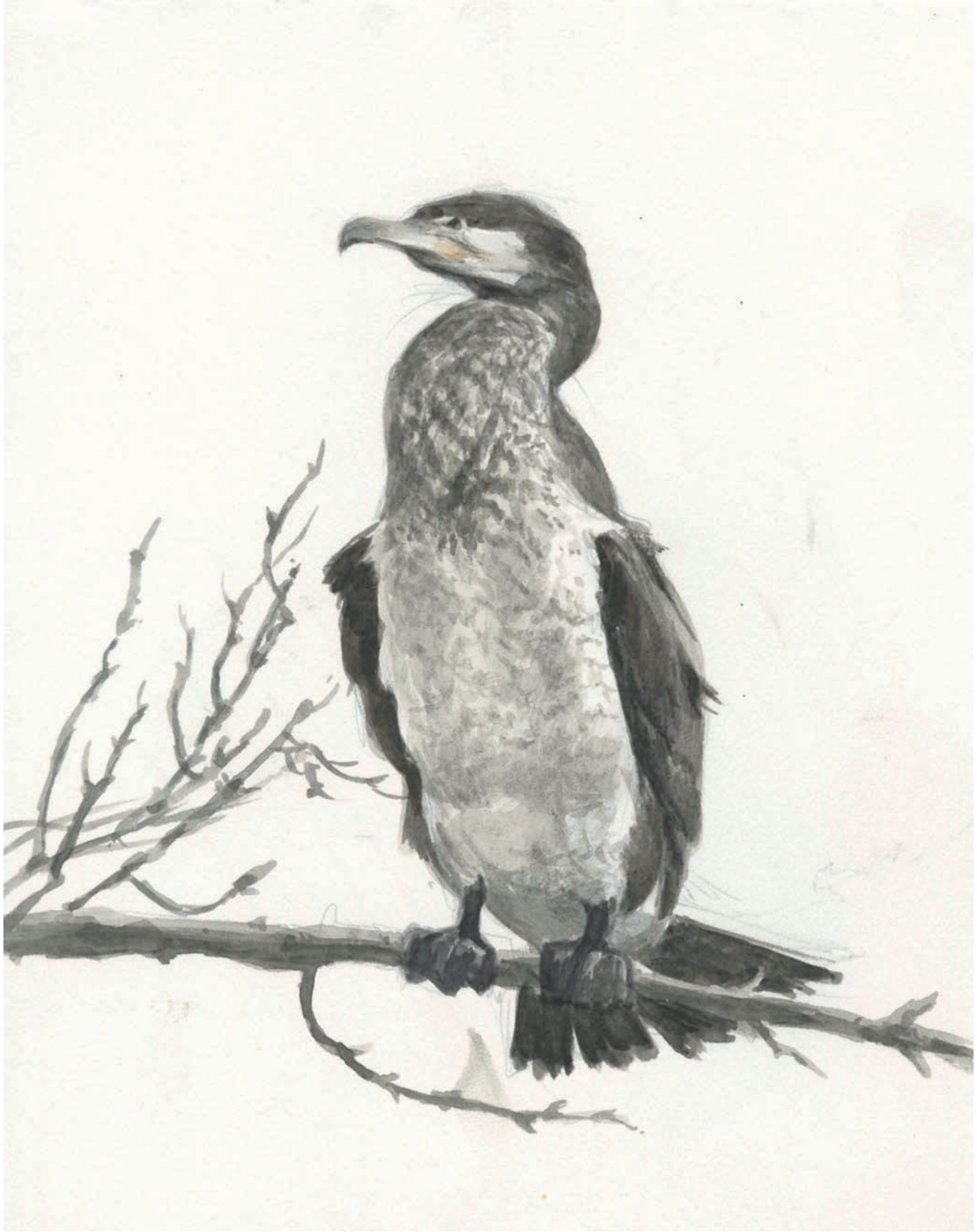


David Bennet: blackgame lek.

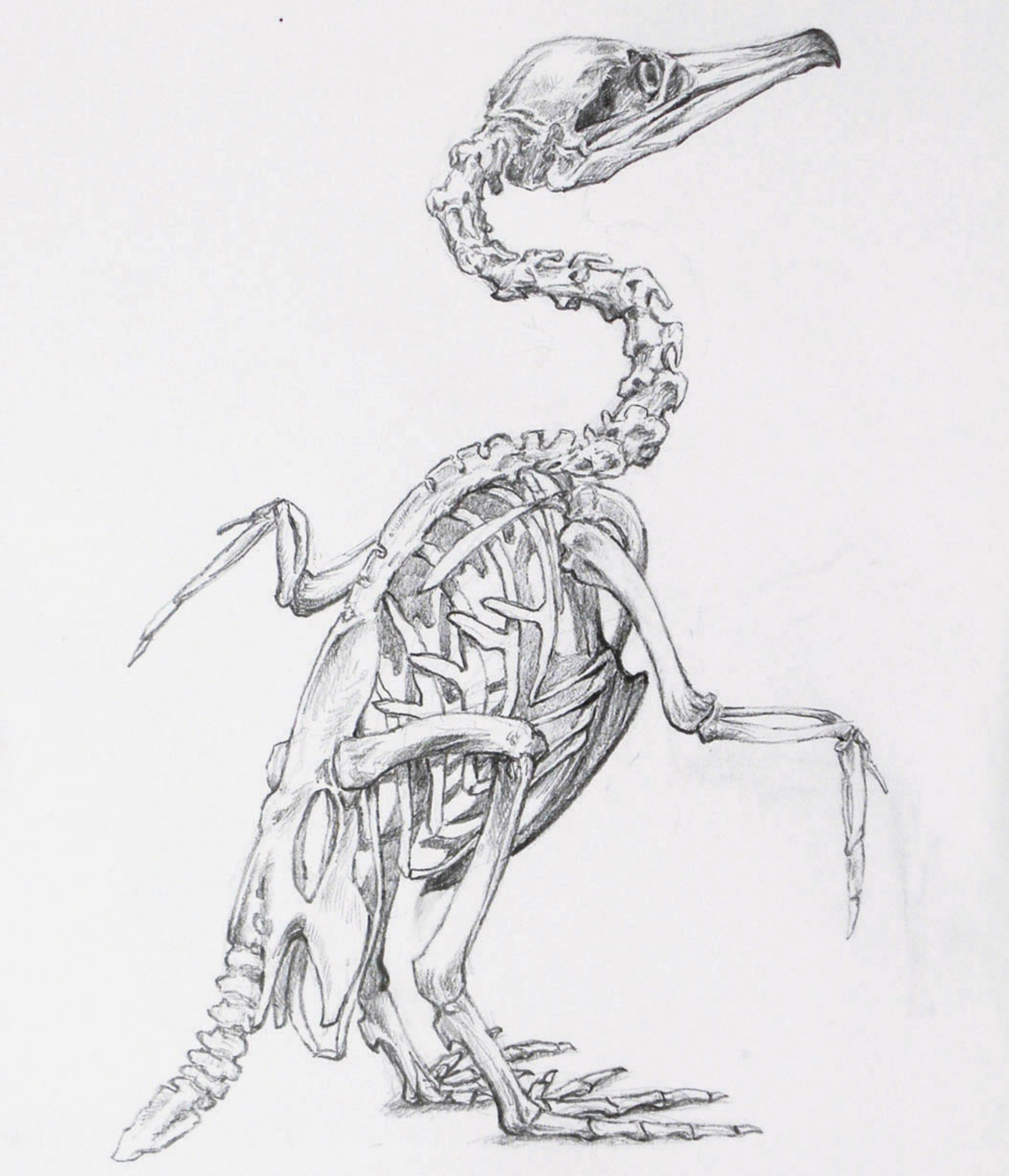
CORMORANTS, SHAGS AND DIVERS

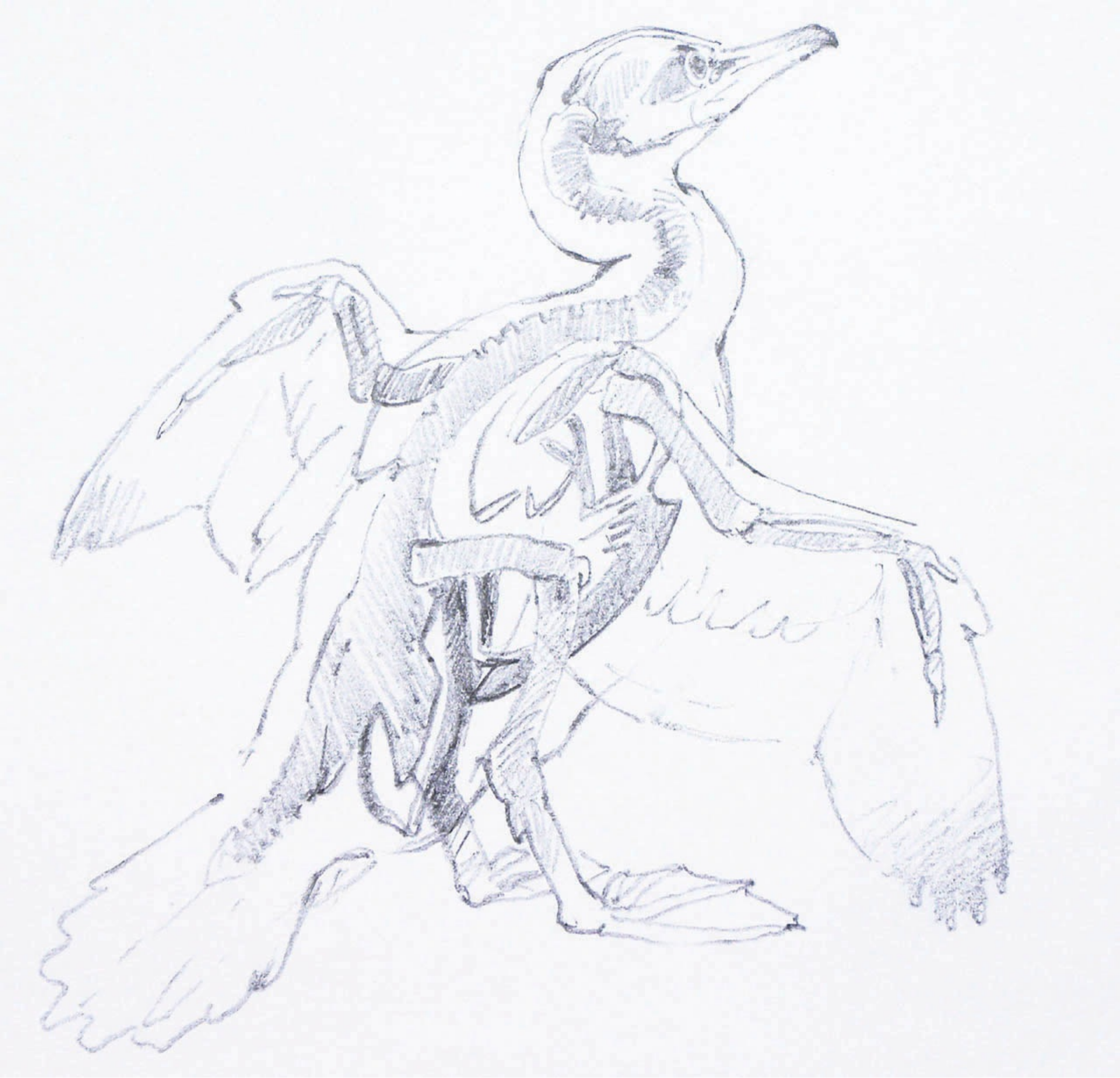
Cormorants and shags are long and cylindrical in body shape with serpentine necks and large wedge-shaped tails. They have broad wings; conspicuous features as they regularly hang them to dry – a typical posture. All four toes are webbed (as in gannets) and their short and powerful legs are used to propel them through the water as they dive frequently for their prey, primarily fish. They have long and fiercely hooked bills, which are excellent for catching and holding fish.

When drawing these forms, particular focus ought to be on the neck and head; the long neck can create some curious shapes when extended and is even more complicated when hunched up. Watch for the point of balance, too: the legs are set well back and they have a most upright stance. Because of the short tarsus (foot) they can look ungainly when perched. They sit low in the water and don’t appear to have the buoyancy of ducks or geese; often there will be just a hump of back showing and the neck periscoping at the front end. They have oily plumage that appears glossy and slick, particularly on the backs and wings.

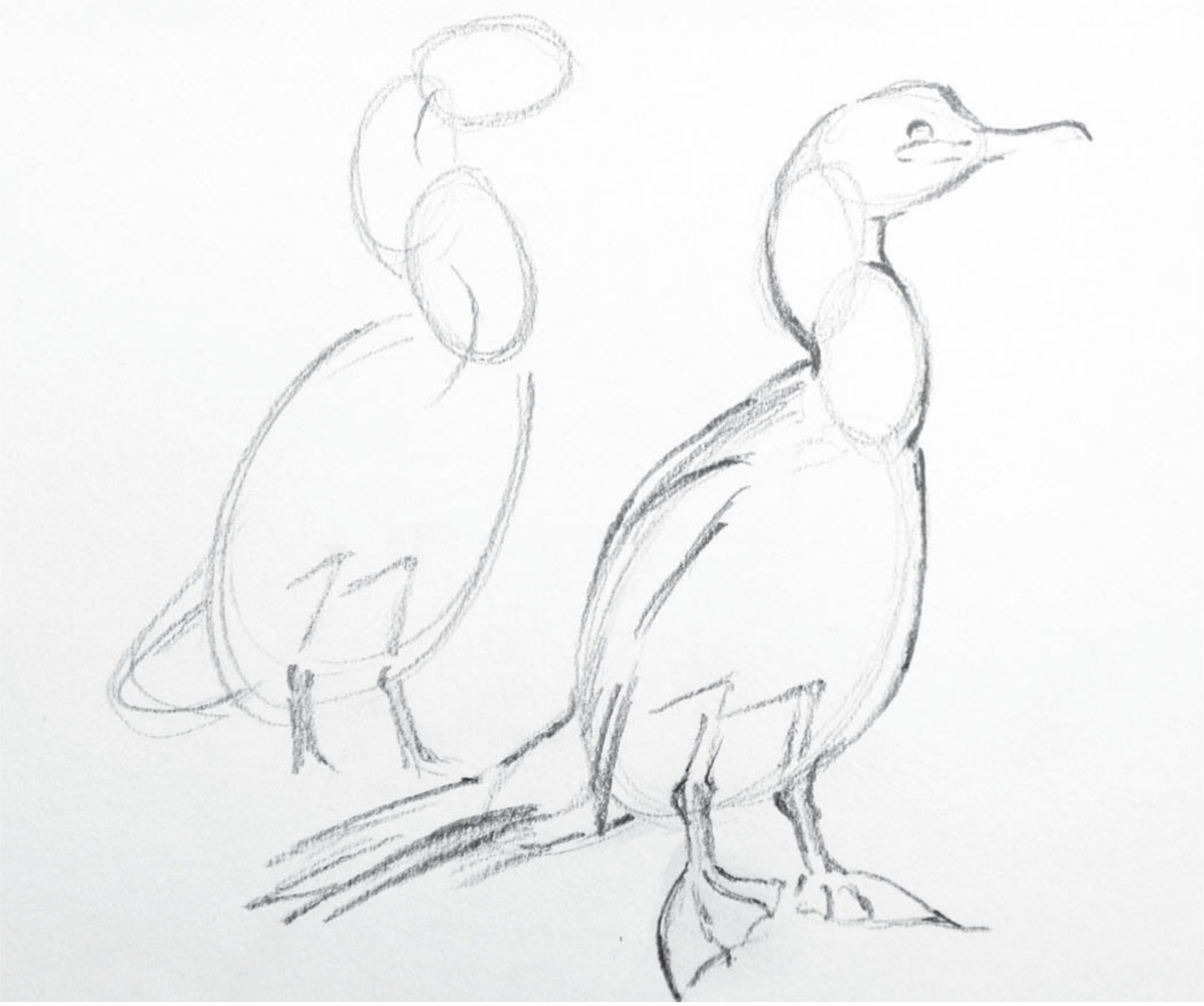


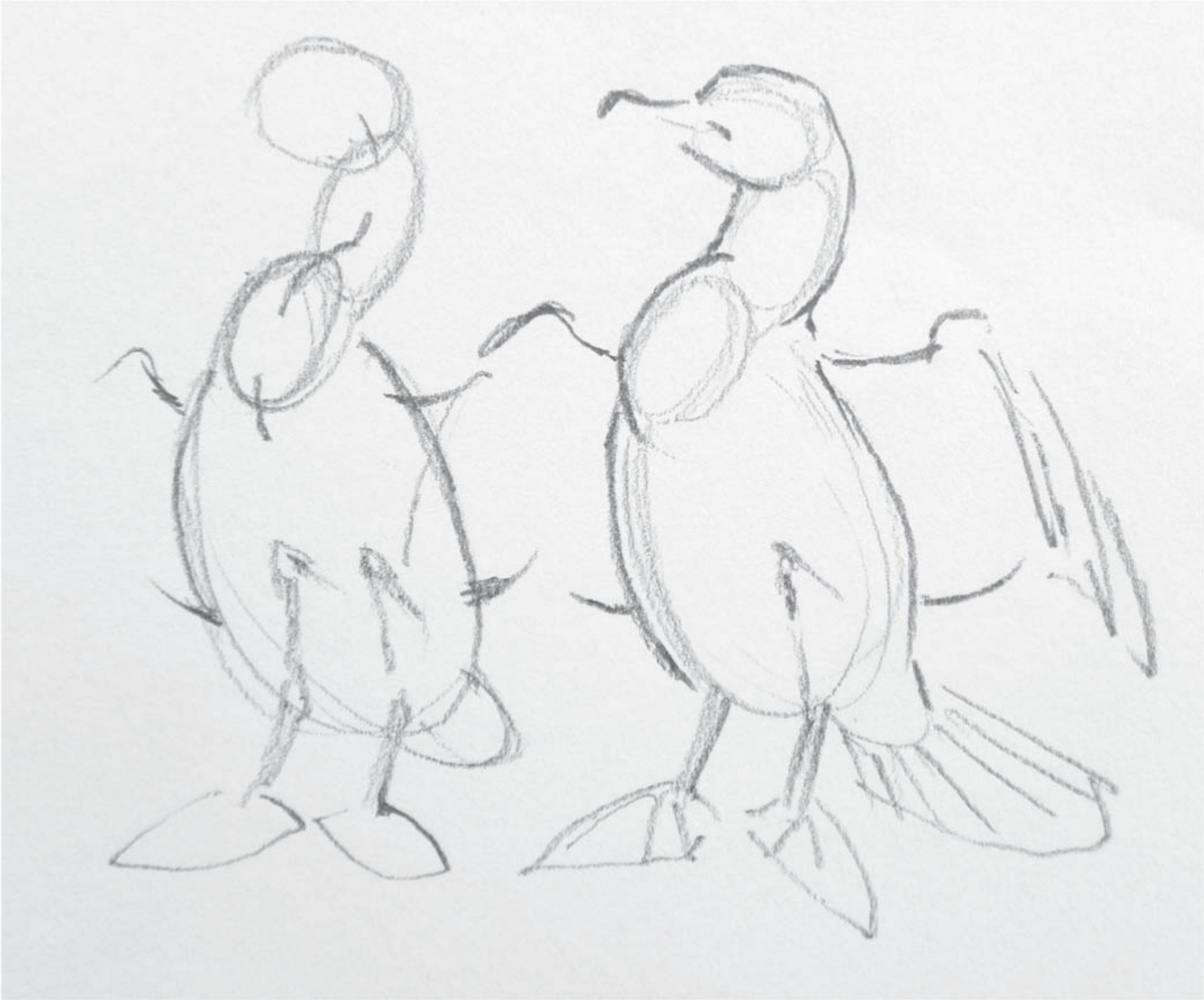
Paschalis Dougalis: cormorant.



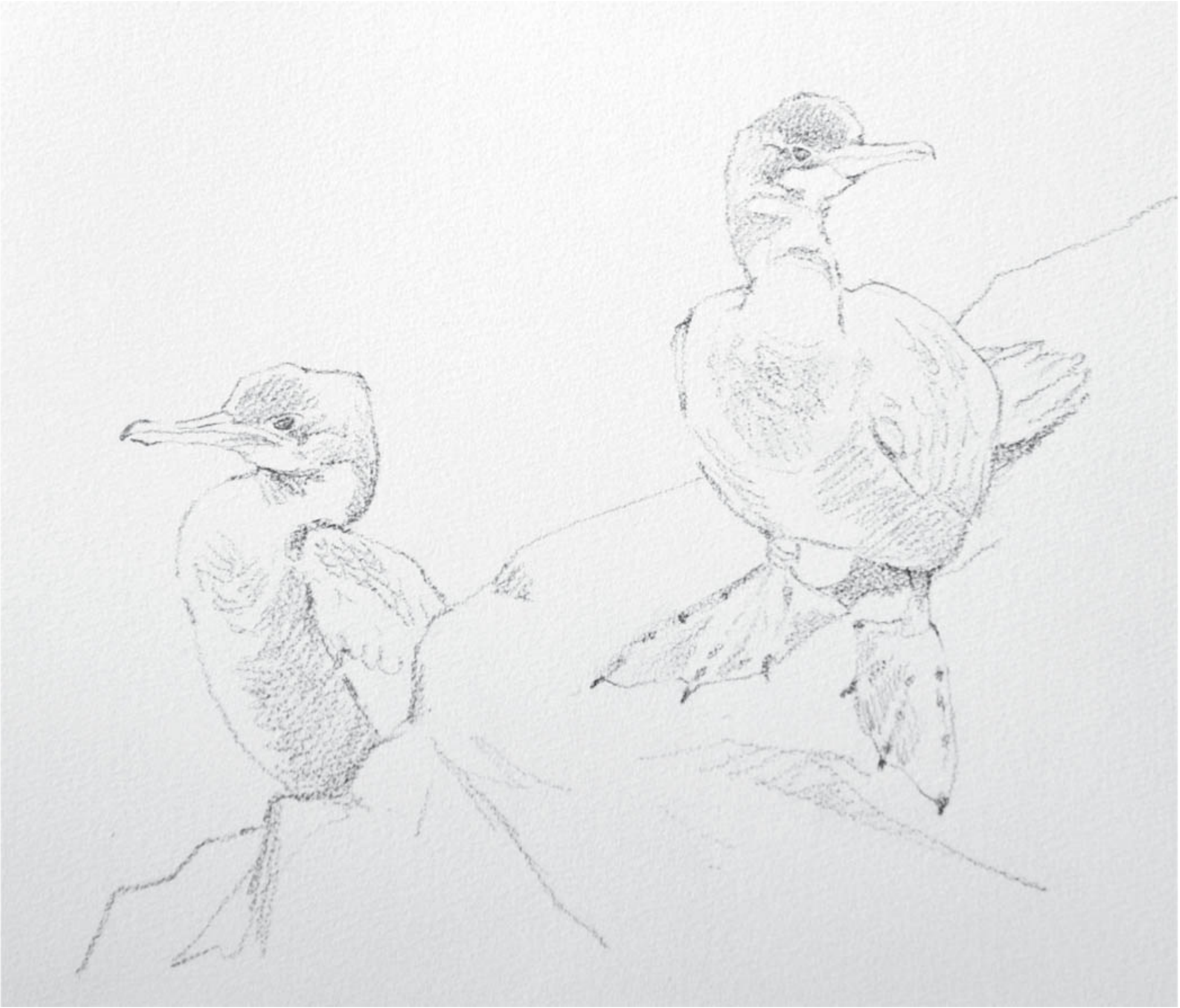


Tim Wootton: cormorant skeleton.

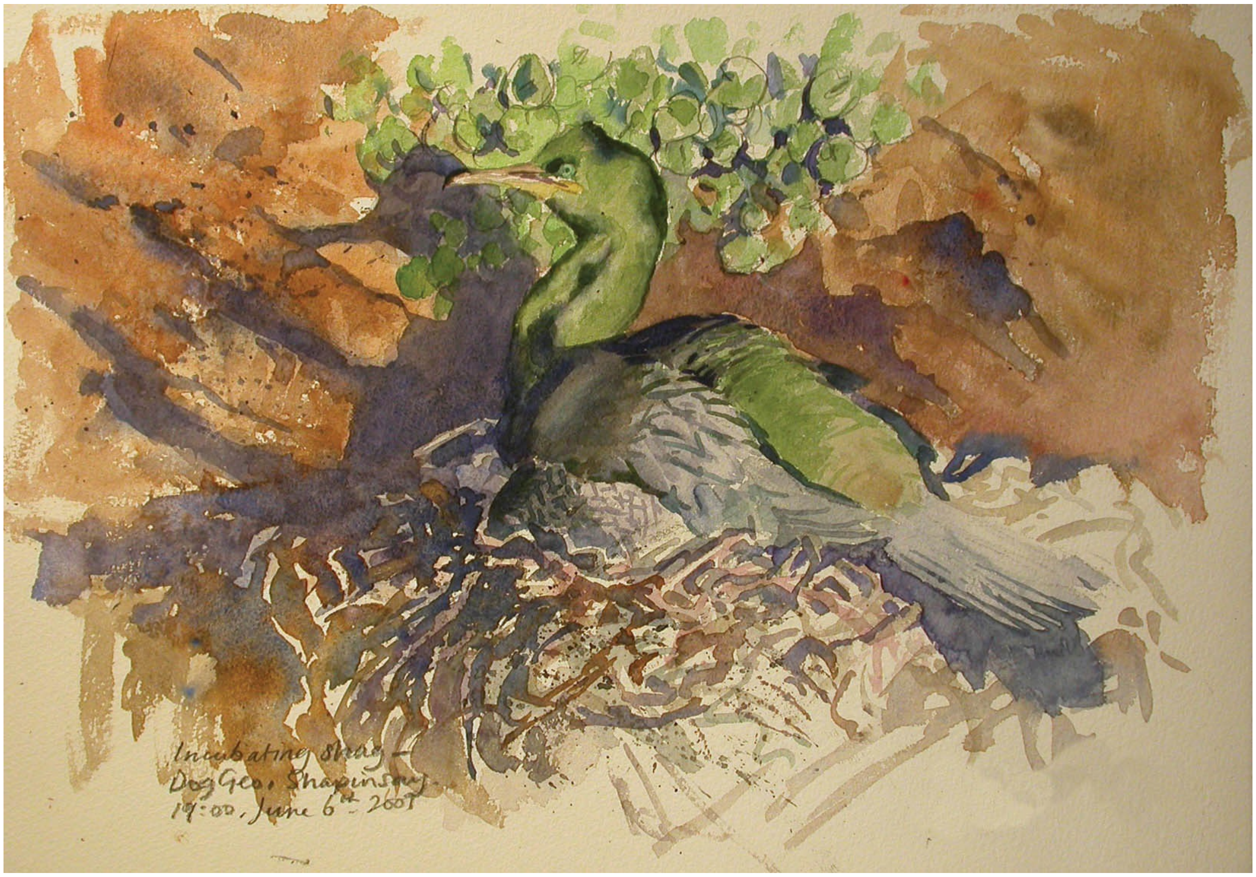




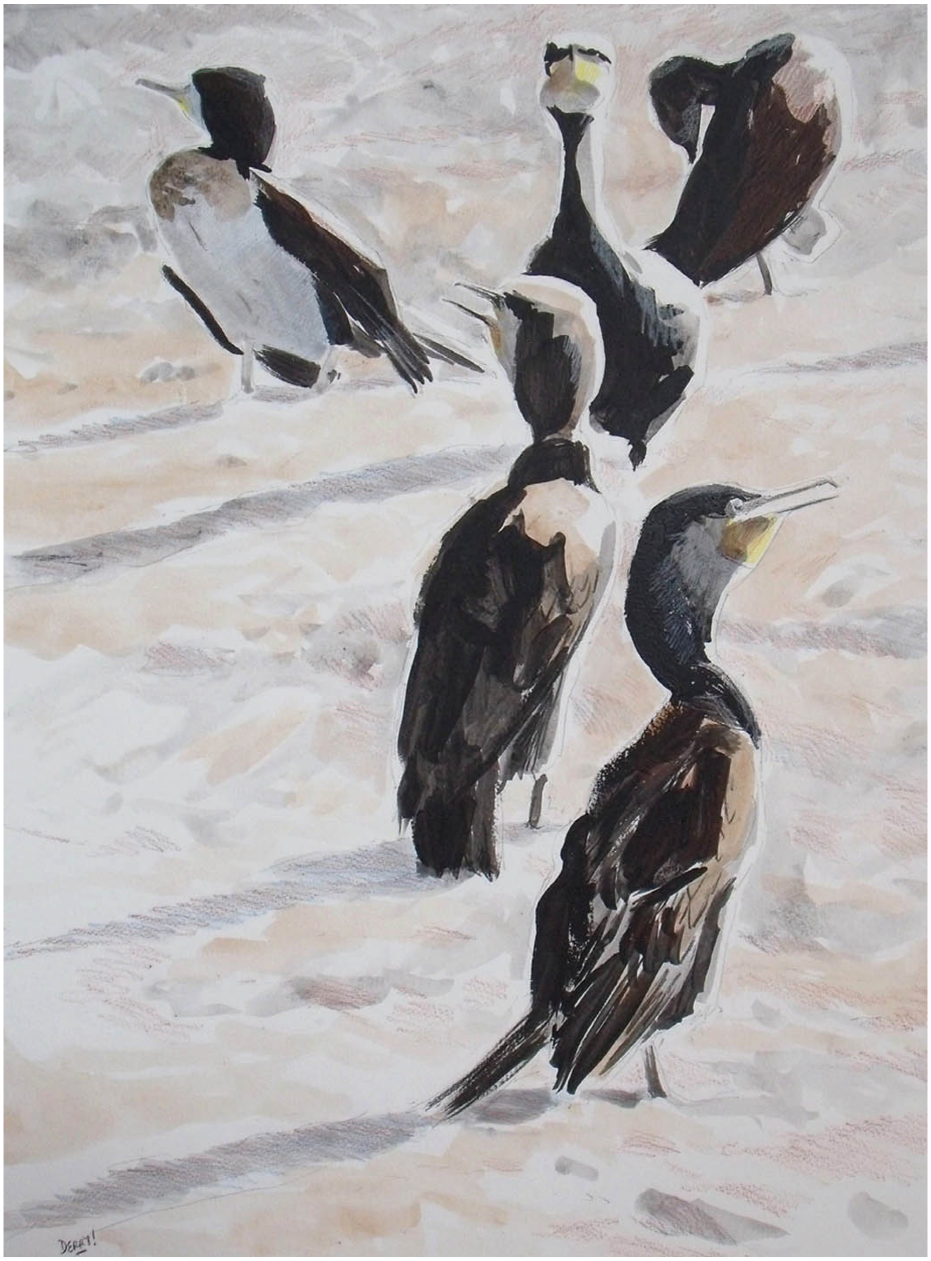
Tim Wootton: shags.



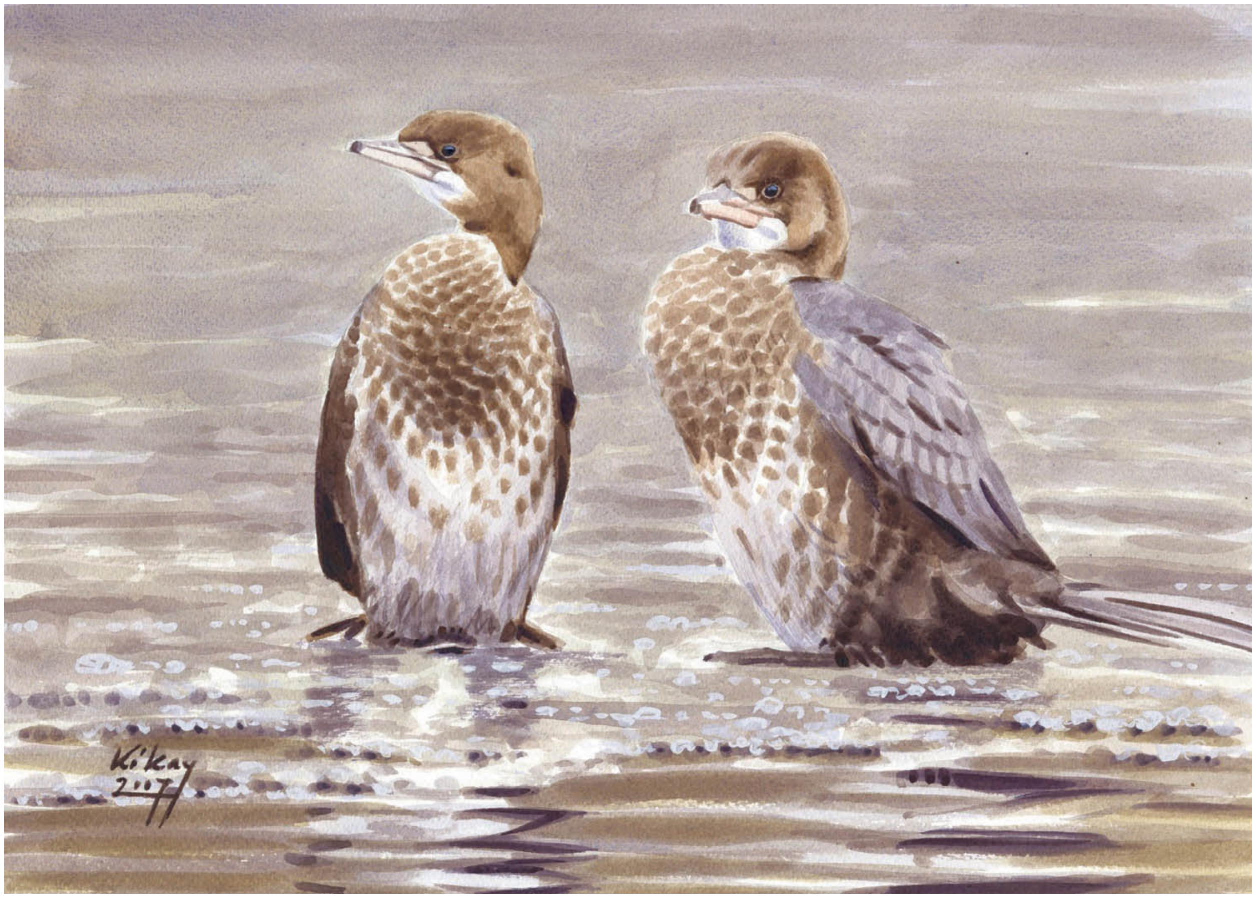
Tim Wootton: juvenile shags.


Incubating Shag –
Dog Geo, Shapinsay.
19:00, June 6th 2007

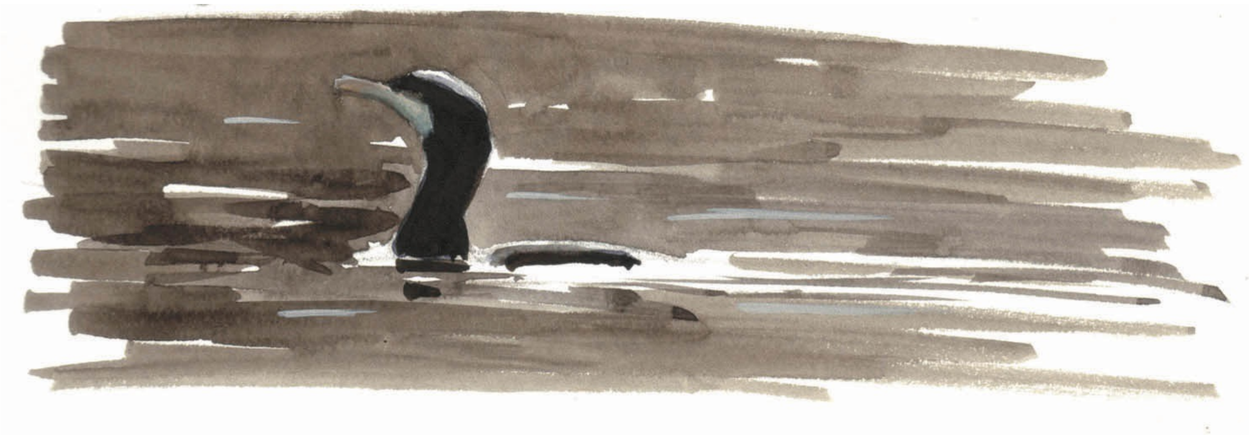
Tim Wootton: brooding shag.



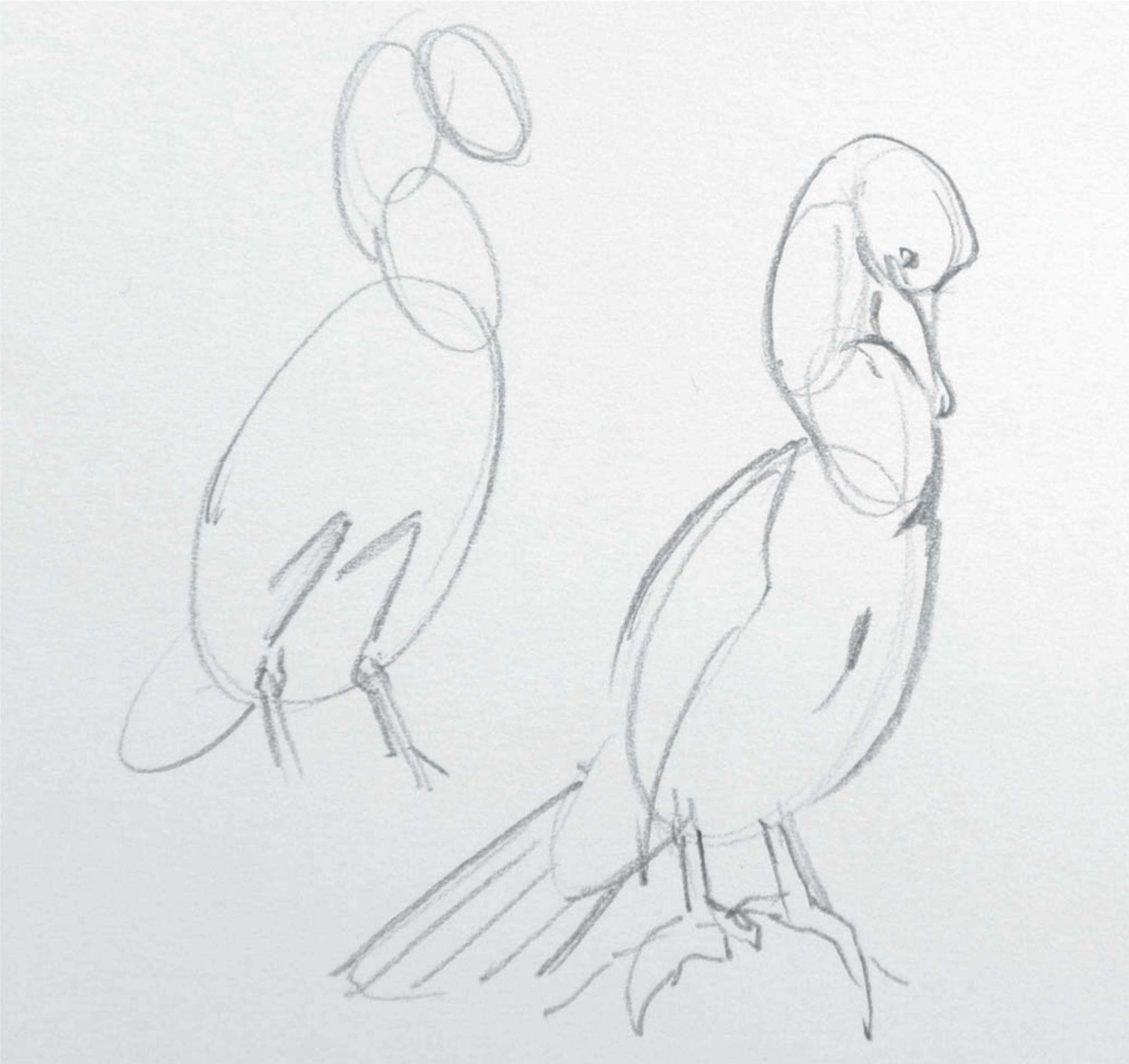
Nick Derry: cormorants.



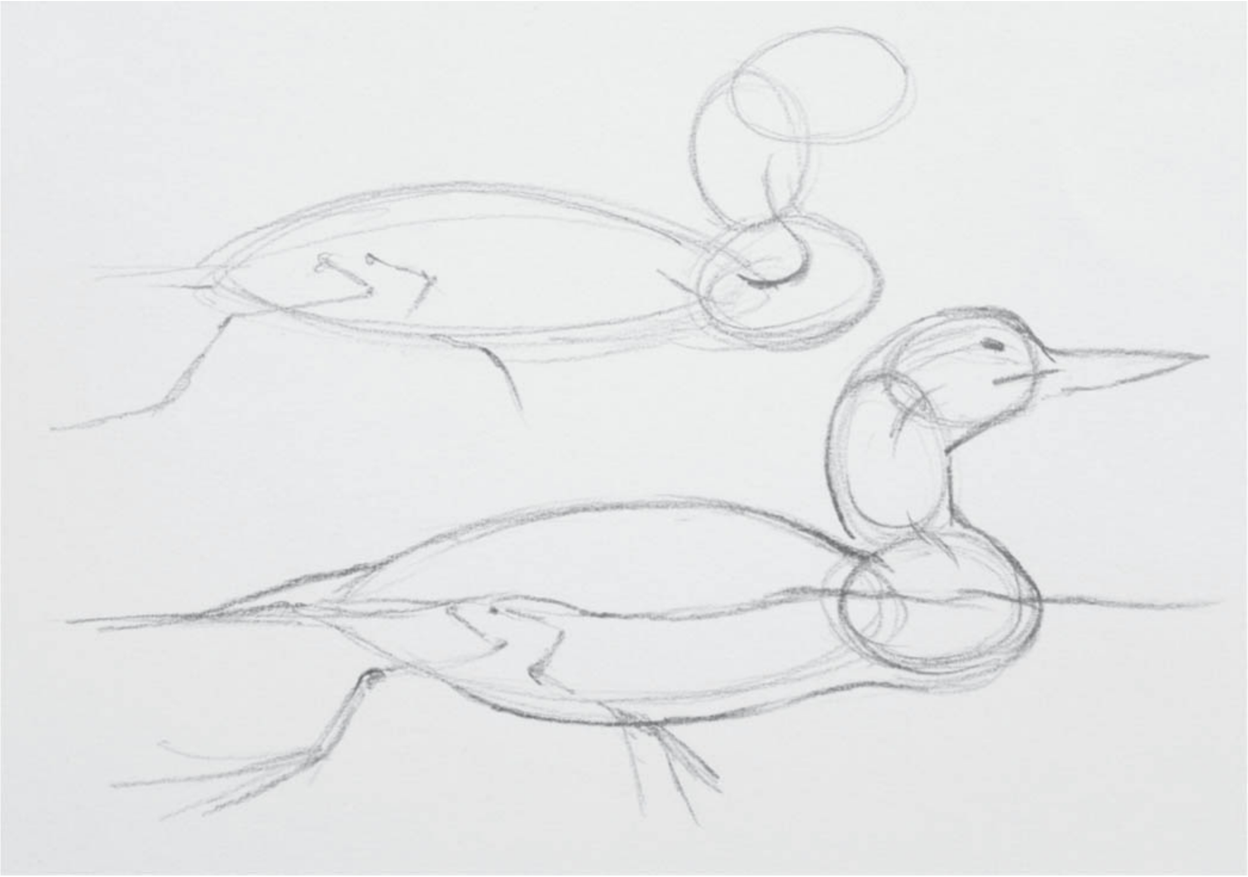
Szabolcs Kokay: pigmy cormorants.



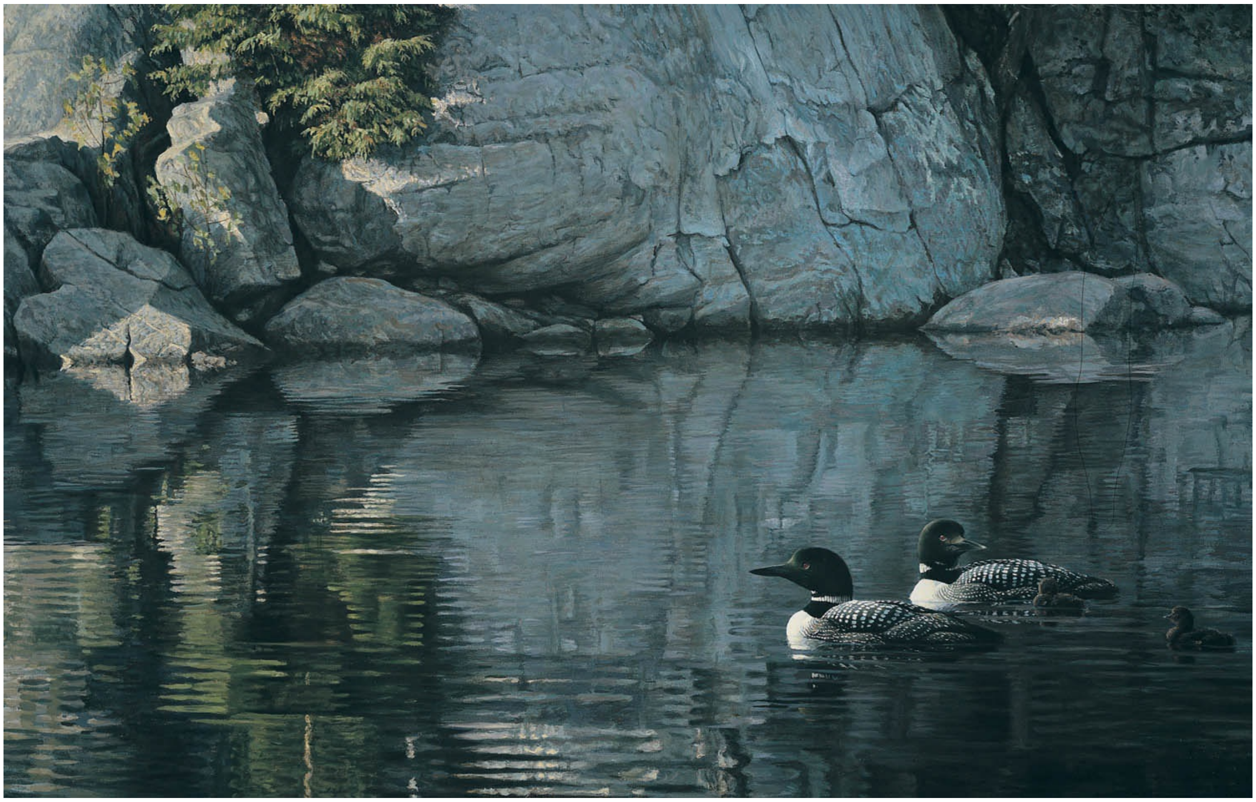
John Threlfall: cormorant study.



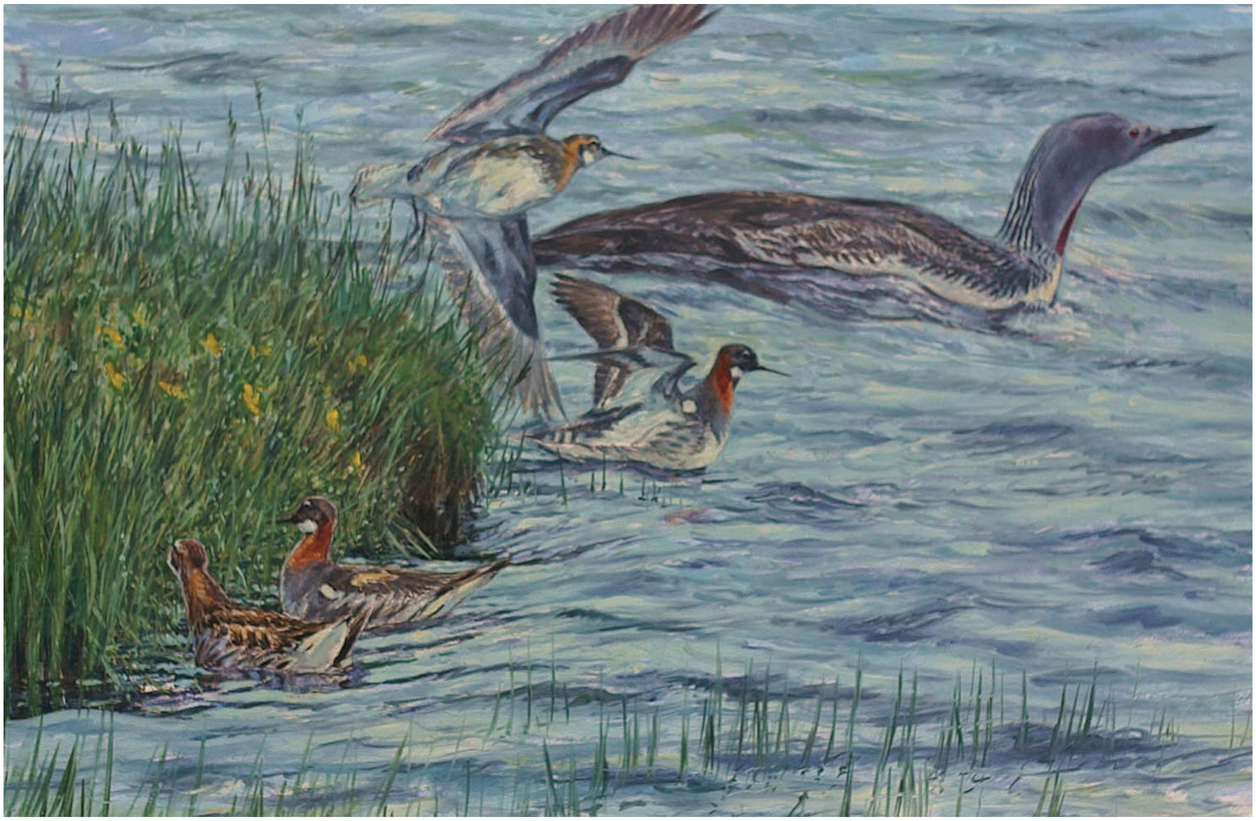
Tim Wootton: shags.



Tim Wootton: diver.



Robert Bateman: ***Northern Reflections*** **– common loons (great northern divers).**

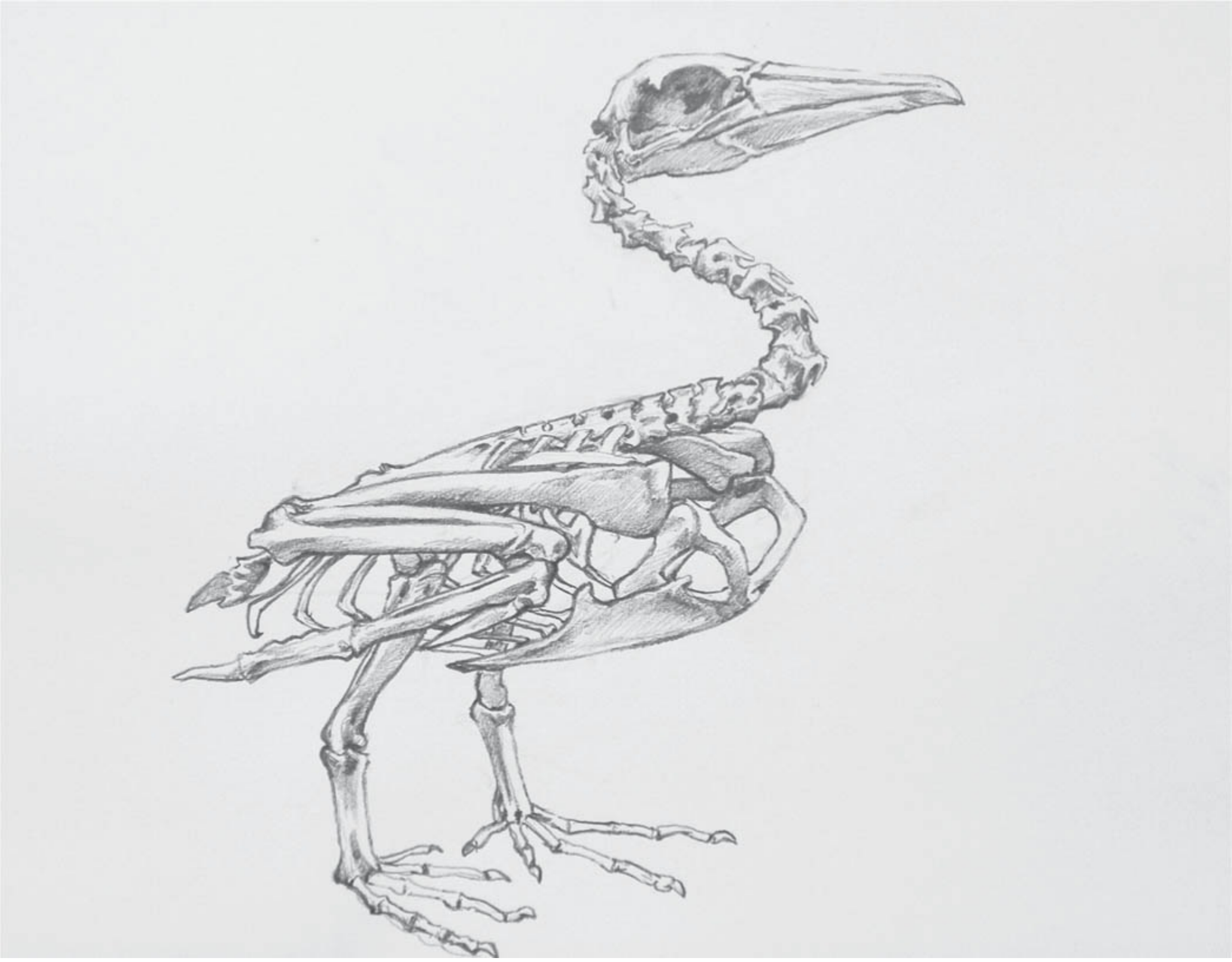


David Bennett: red-throated diver and red-necked phalaropes.

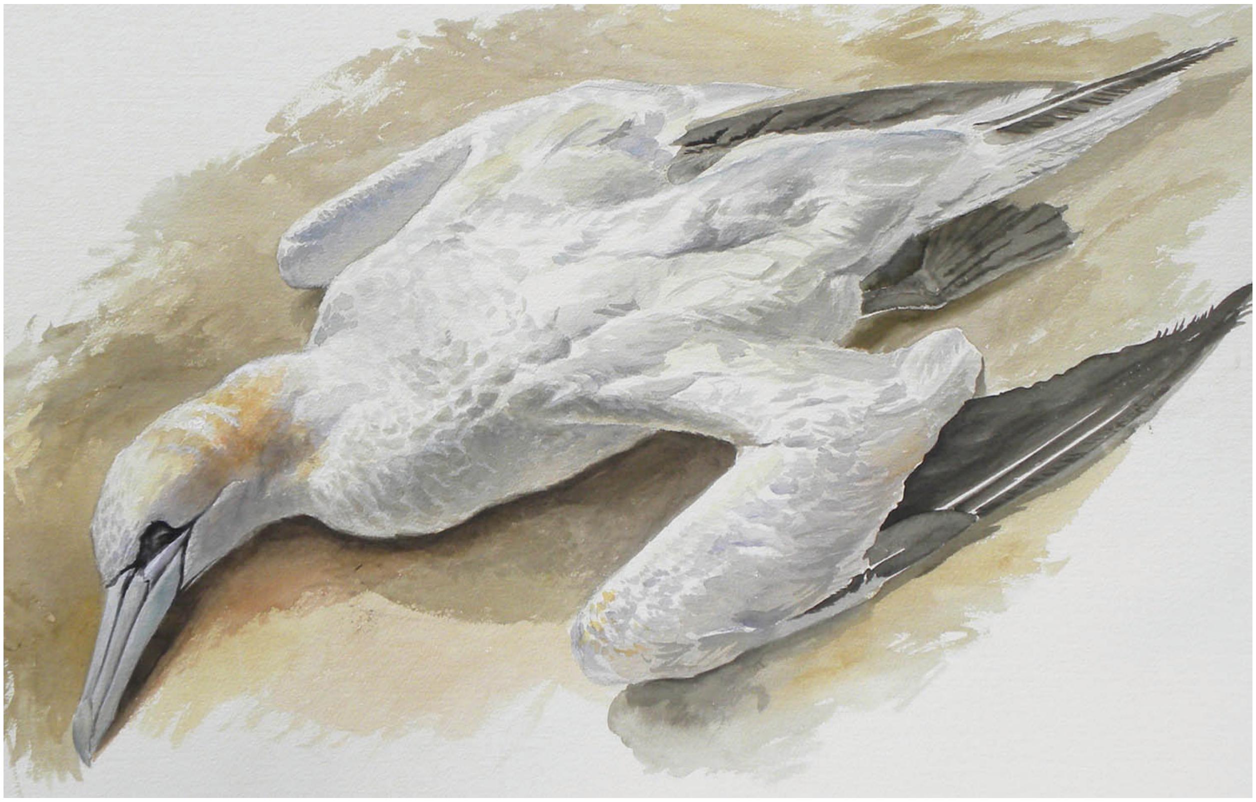
GANNETS AND BOOBIES

These large, goose-sized birds breed colonially and plunge-dive for their food – fish. Spectacular in the air, everything about them suggests power. They have a very strong sternum and clavicle, partly to support the large muscles required to move a heavy bird through the air and partly because of the impact they receive each time they hit the water. Where they breed they are very easy to observe but their neck contortions and long angular wings can cause even the most attentive draughtsman problems.

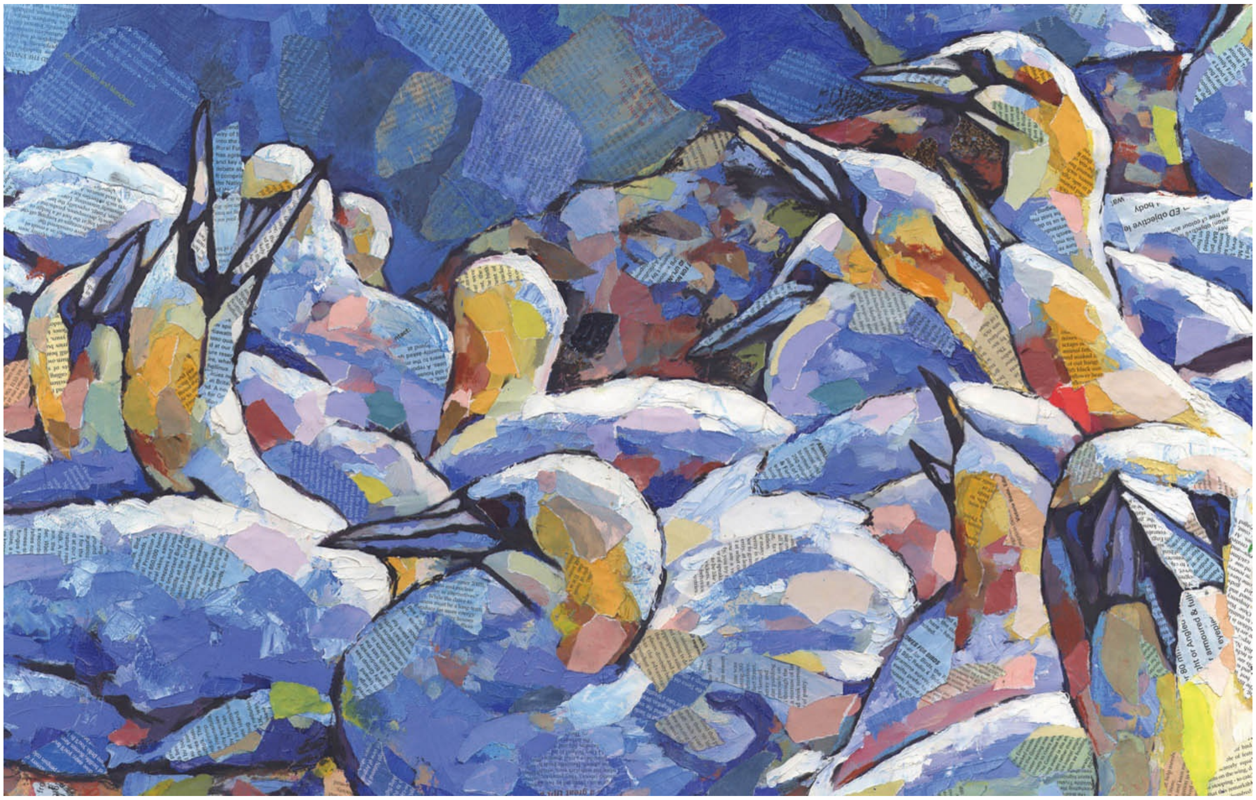
A really heavyweight bill and skull are used as a battering ram to break through the water surface; the bill has delicate lines in blue/grey which can make the structure of the bill difficult to understand (it may help to see it as a long wedge). The important characteristic of the gannet's head is the way the eyes sit on the hard gape of the bill – a dark line continues under and back from this point.



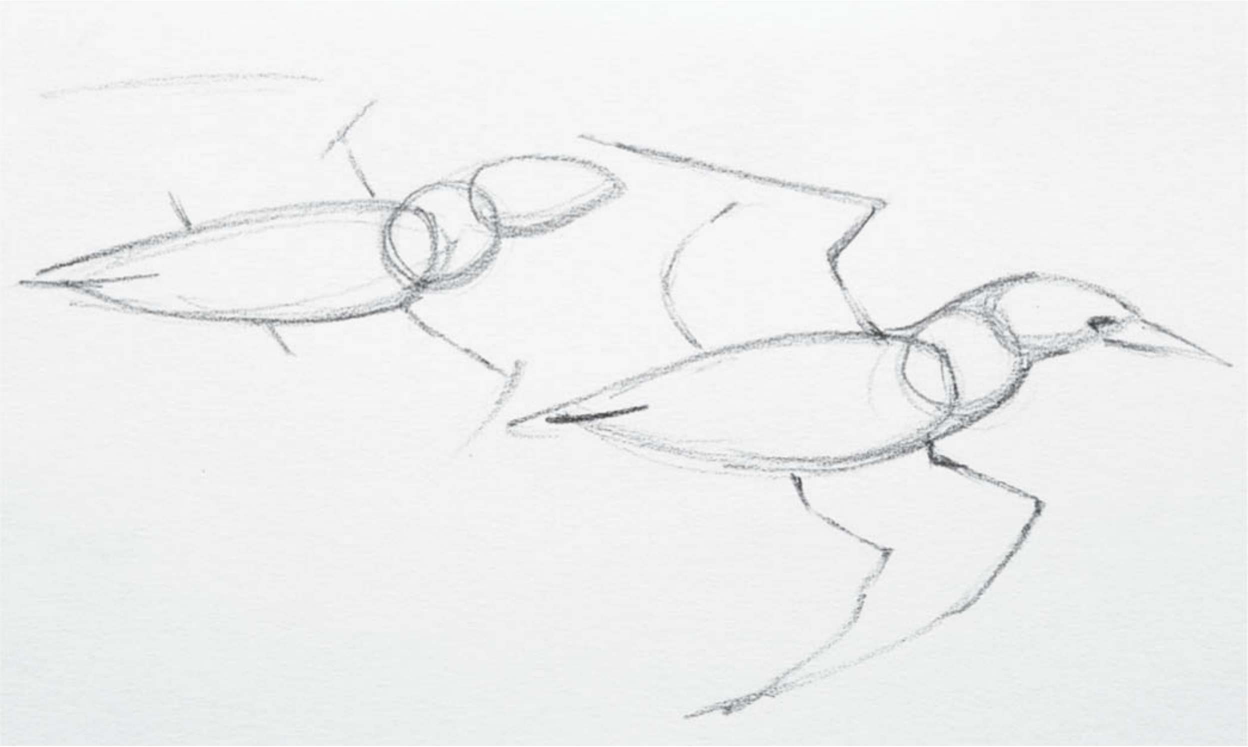
Tim Wootton: gannet skeleton.



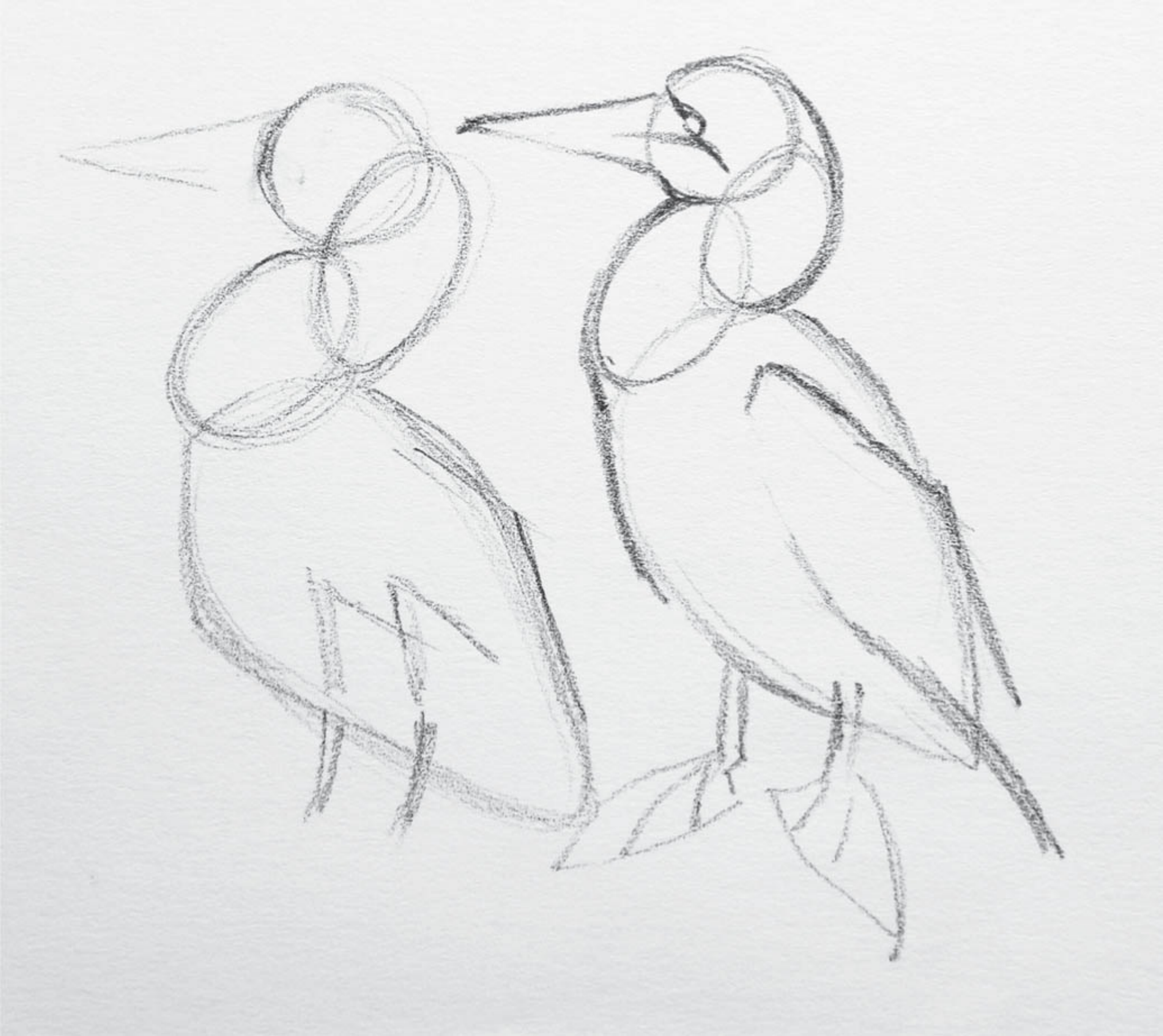
Tim Wootton: gannet post-mortem study.



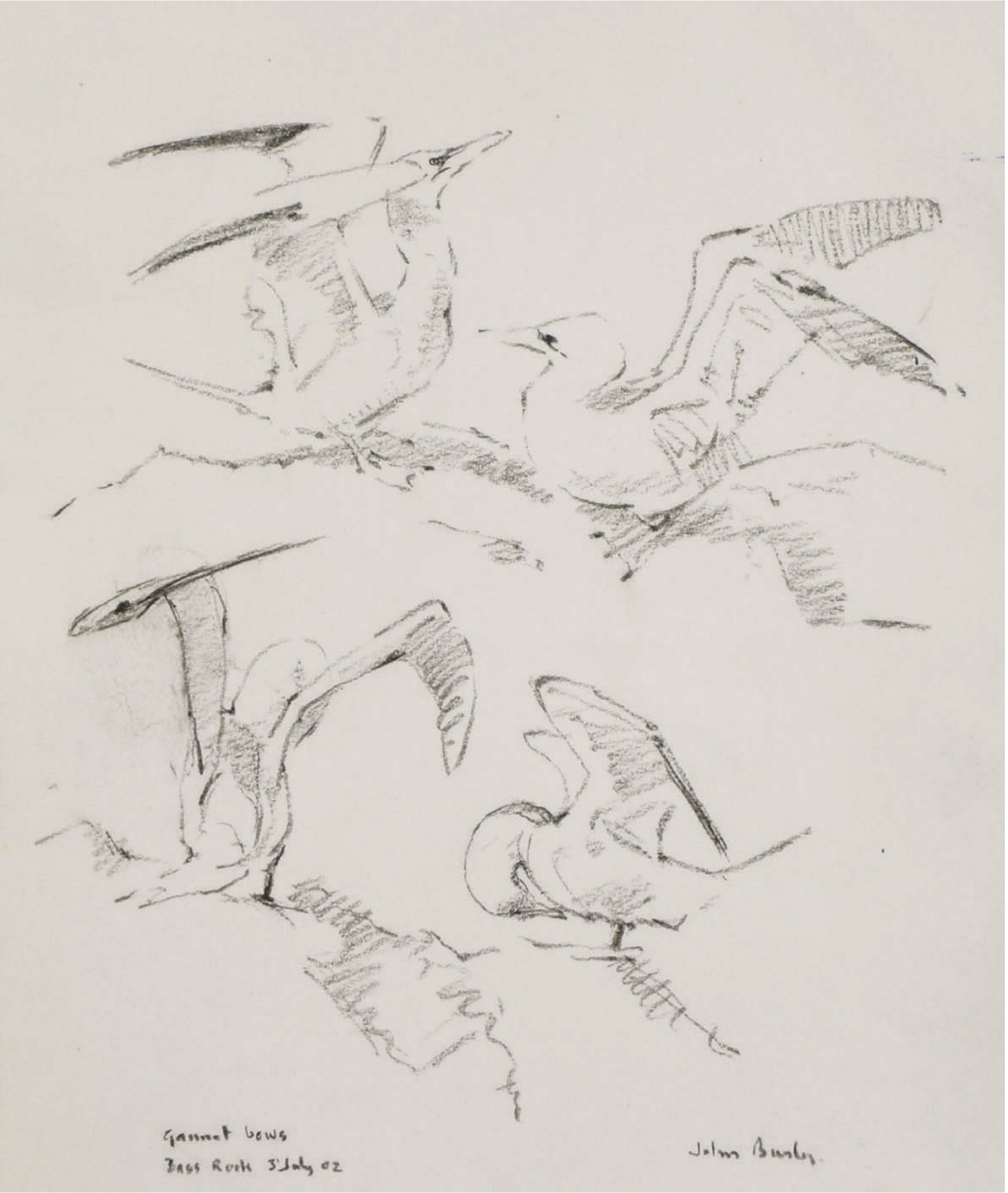
Paul Bartlett: *Life on the Bass Rock*. Collage and acrylics. A riot of subtle hues and printed paper collaborate in the ‘whites’ of the gannets; fierce eyes and fiercer bills jab at any neighbour who strays.



Tim Wootton: gannets.



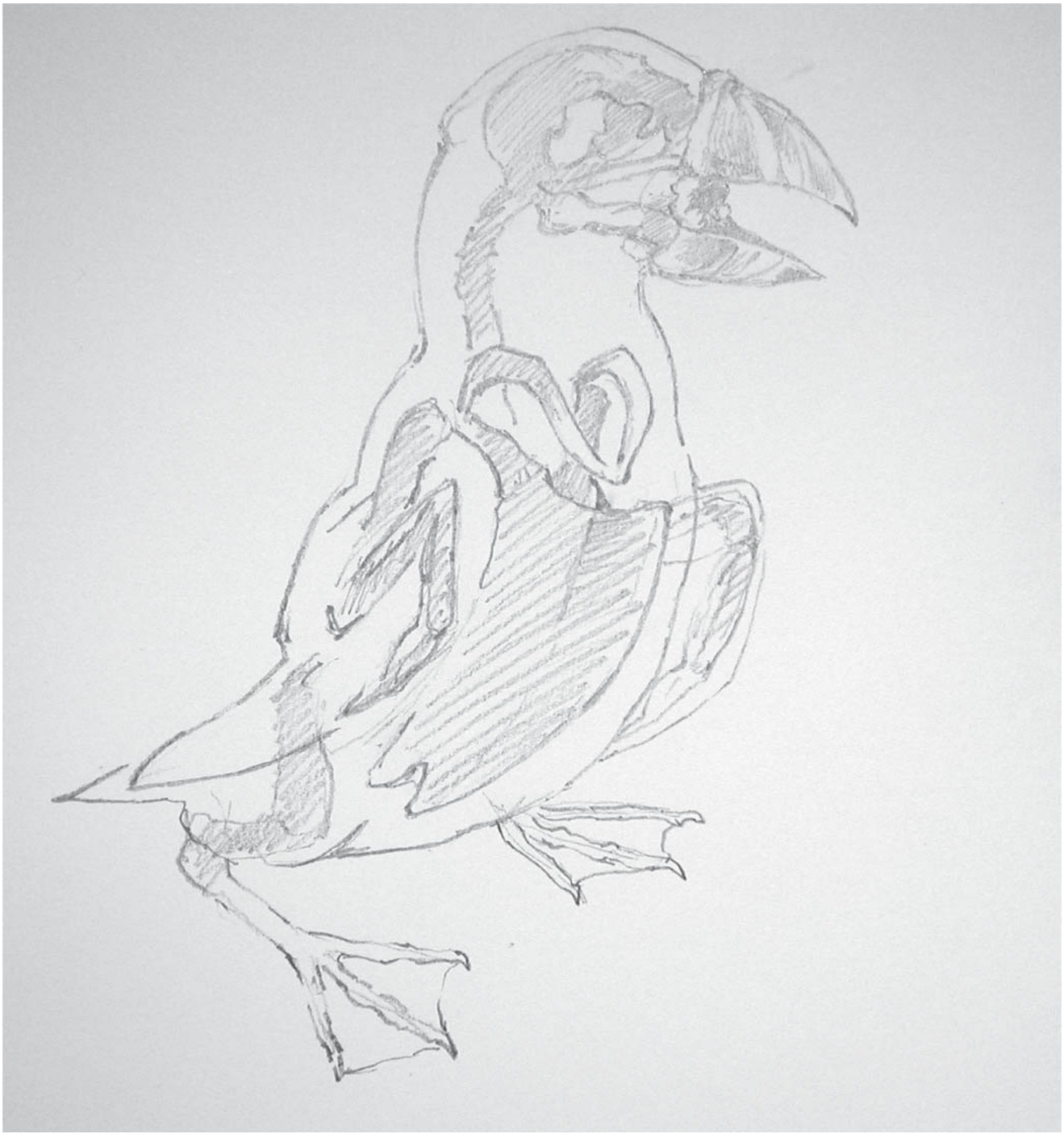
Tim Wootton: gannets.


Gannet bows
Bass Rock 3 July 02
John Busby

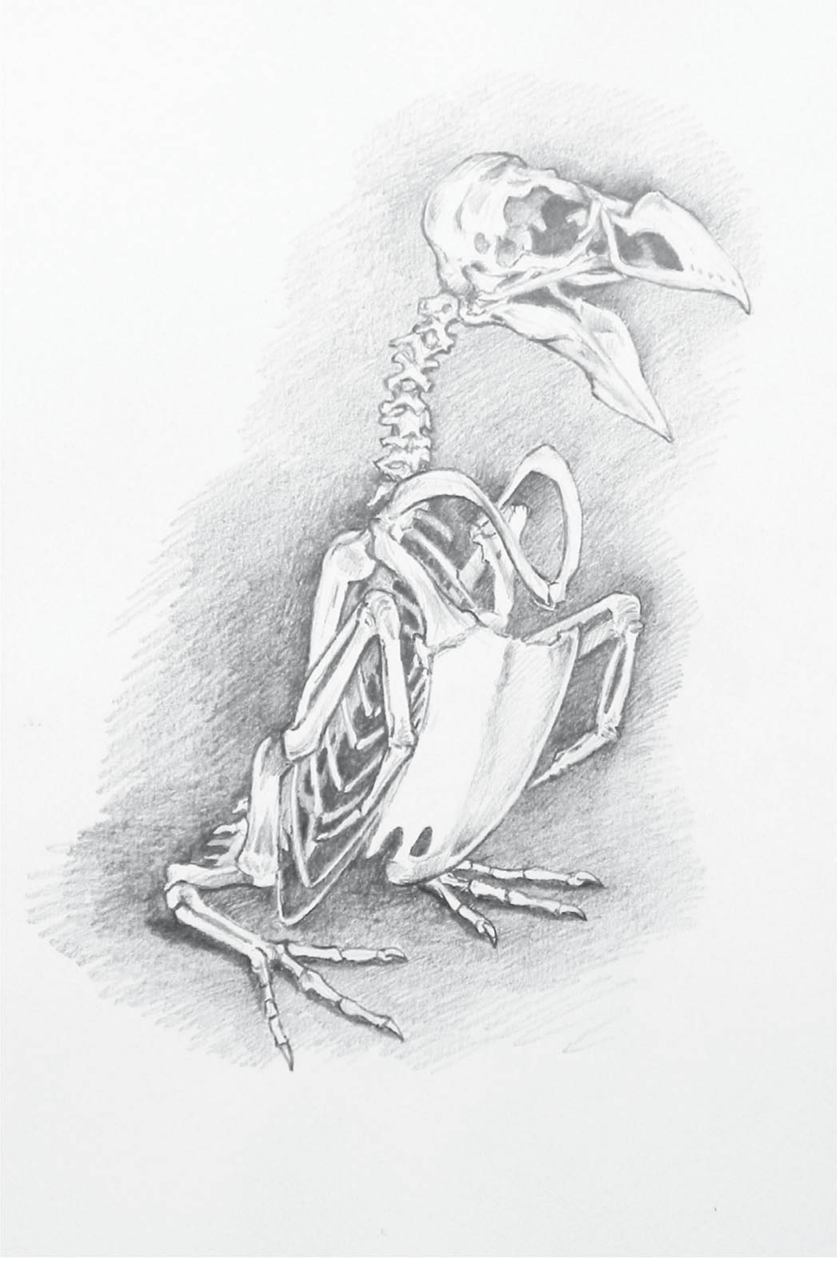
John Busby: gannet courtship – heads and wings in all directions, swaying to an unheard rhythm.

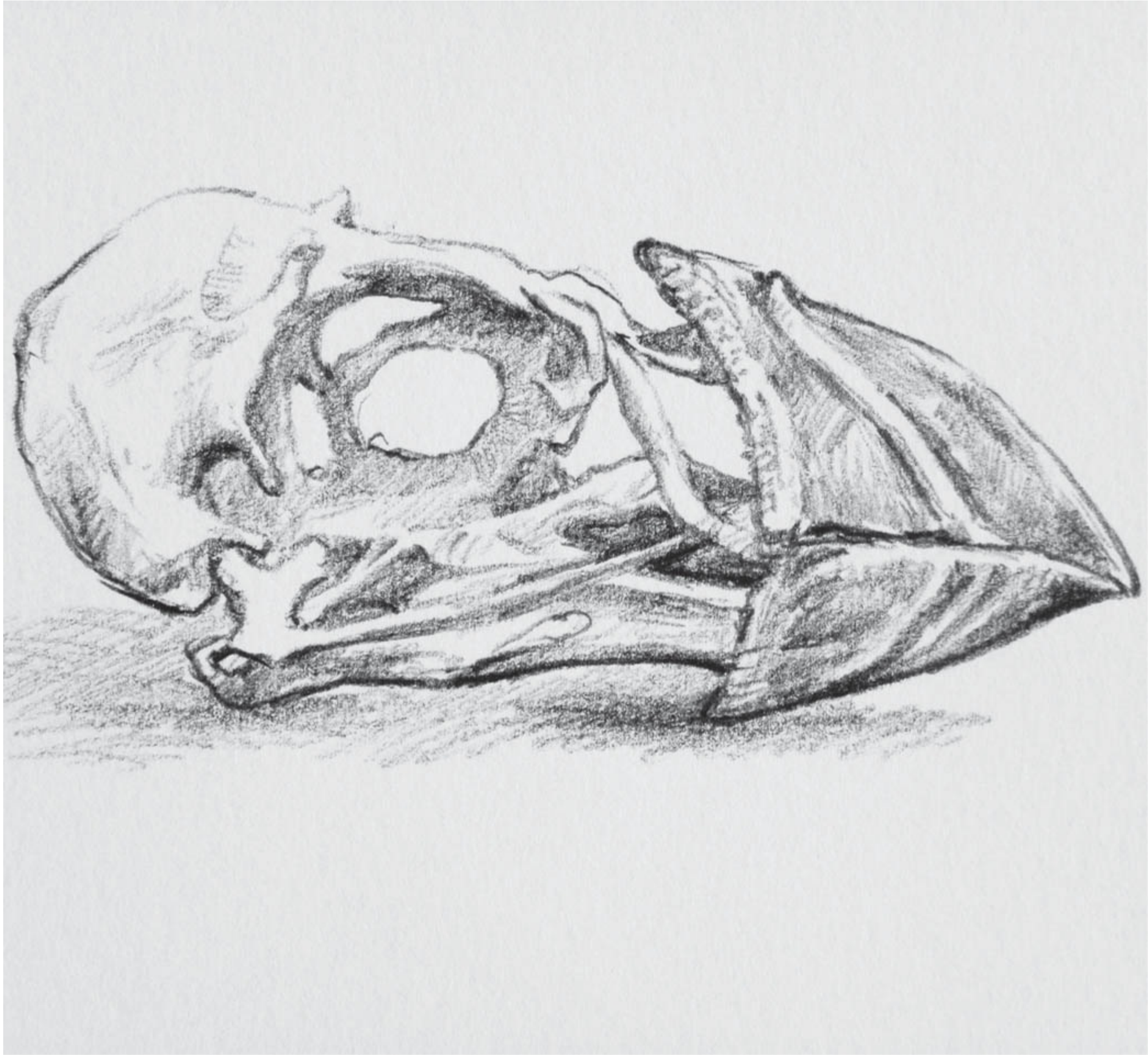
AUKS (PUFFINS, RAZORBILLS AND GUILLEMOTS)

Auks have slim, cylindrical bodies that are wider at the chest, giving them a ‘puffed-out’ appearance. They have short stubby legs and short narrow wings, and are characterized by their upright stance and cliff-nesting habits. They are excellent swimmers and dive to incredible depths for fish – common guillemots were noted by oil-rig divers working in the North Sea at depths of 400 metres and more! A look at their anatomy helps us to understand how this works: they have long and very deep sternums to which very large muscles are attached. This serves two purposes: first, it protects their internal organs in deep water (the pressure would crush them otherwise); and second, because their wings have evolved to be short and narrow – ideal for underwater swimming, but not so good for soaring and gliding. Therefore their method of flight is all action with fast, whirring wings – big muscles are required for this.

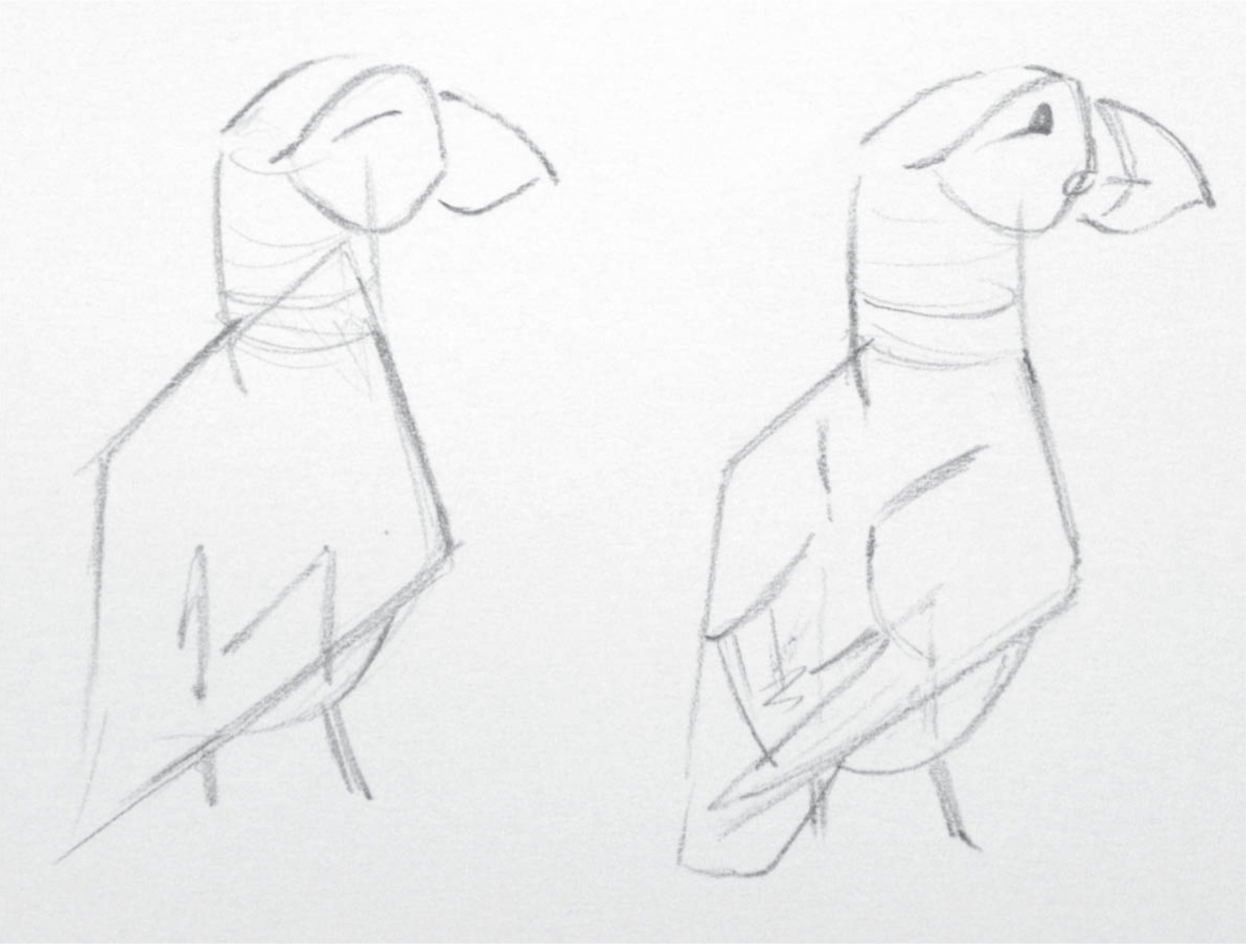


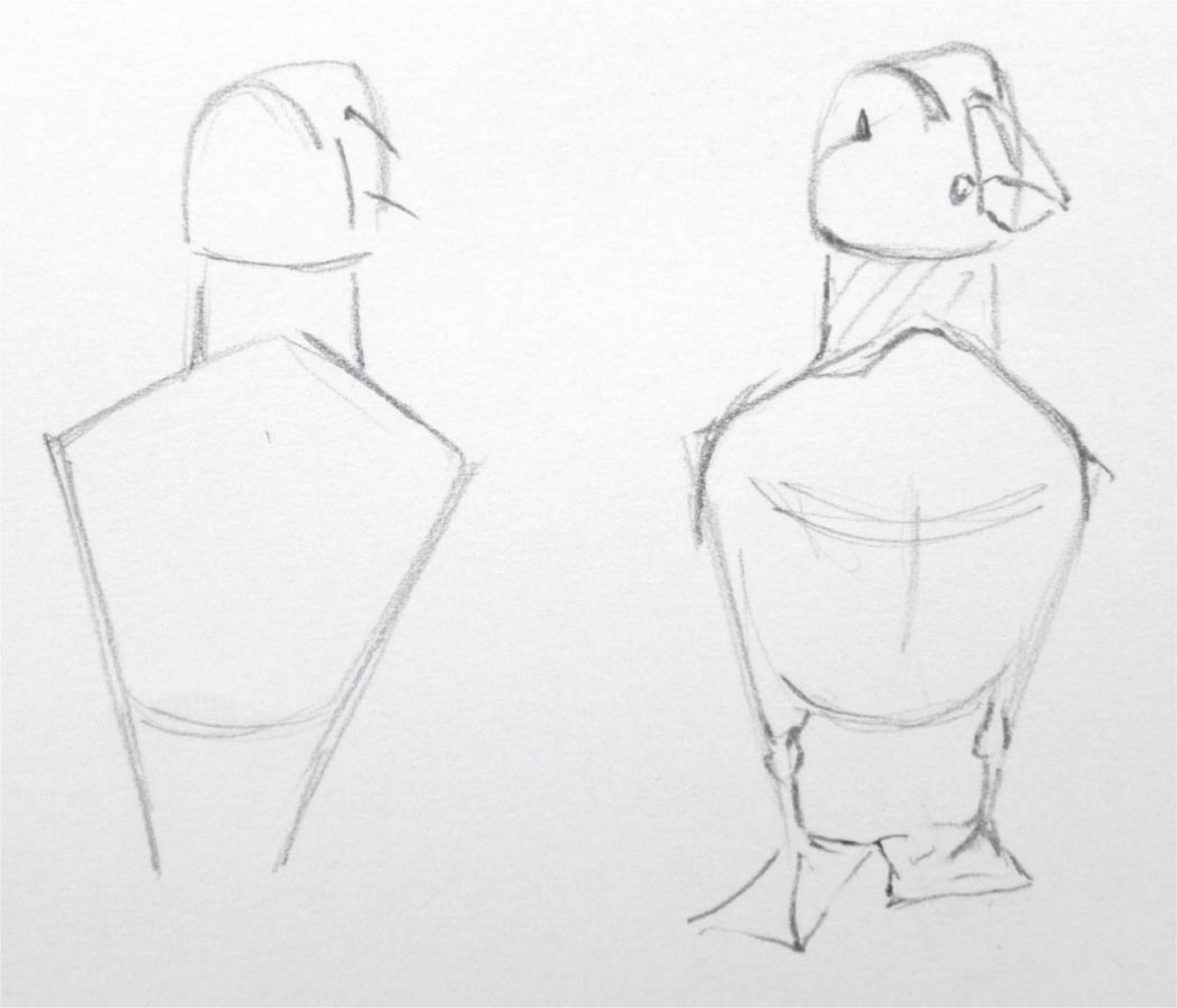
Tim Wootton: puffin skeleton.



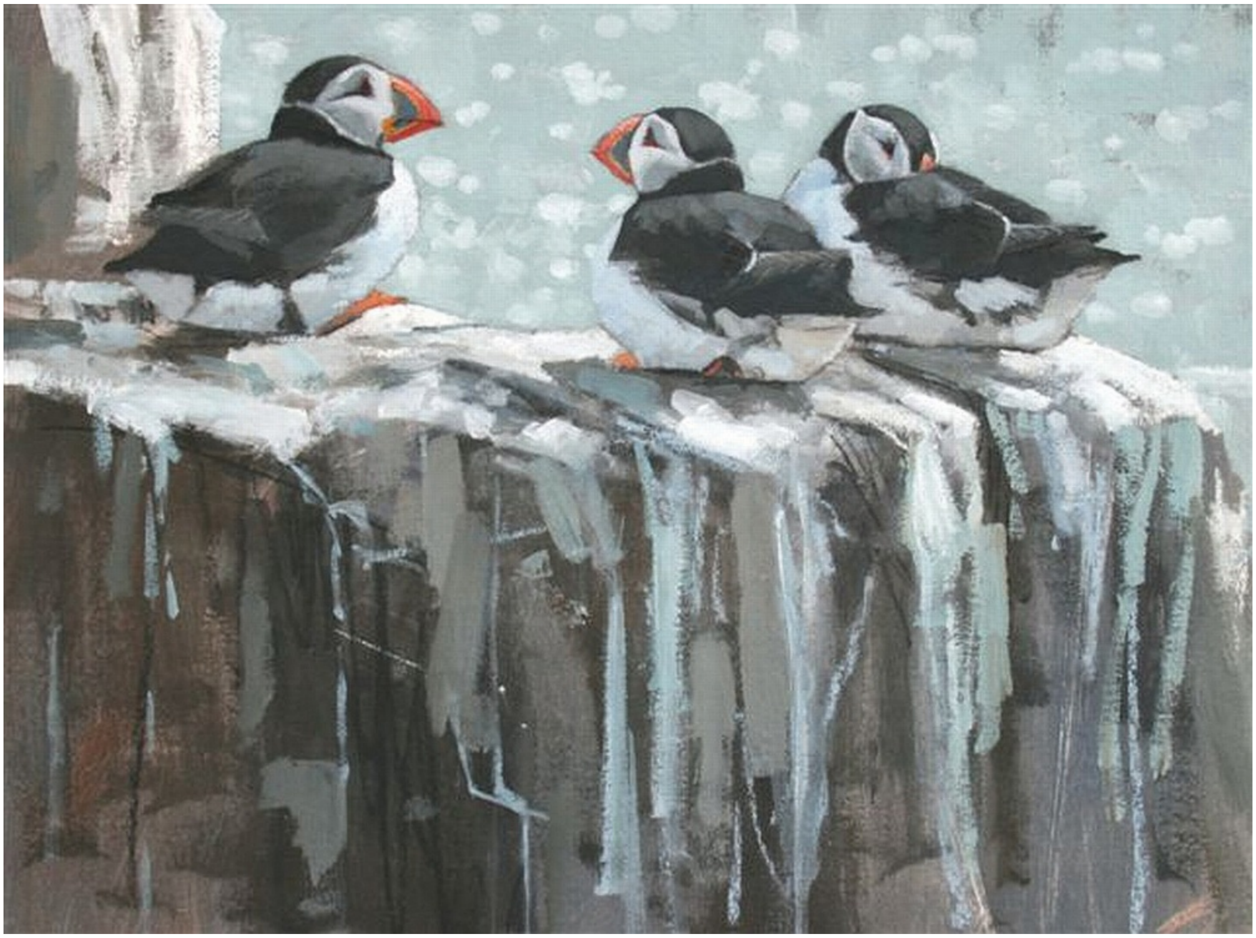


Tim Wootton: puffin skeleton. Skull lacking horny sheath and puffin skull with horny sheath *in situ*.





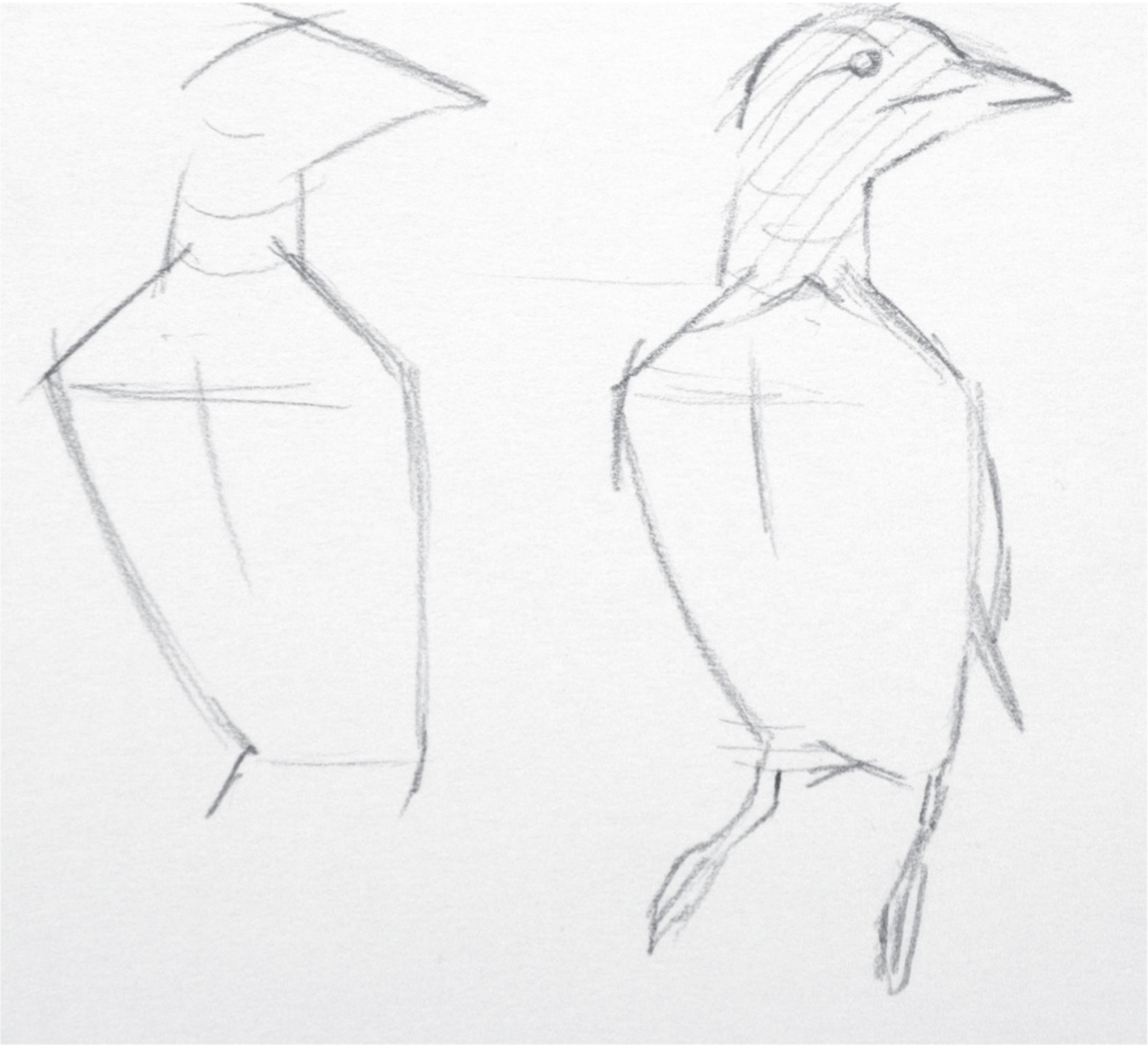
Tim Wootton: puffins.



John Threlfall: puffins.

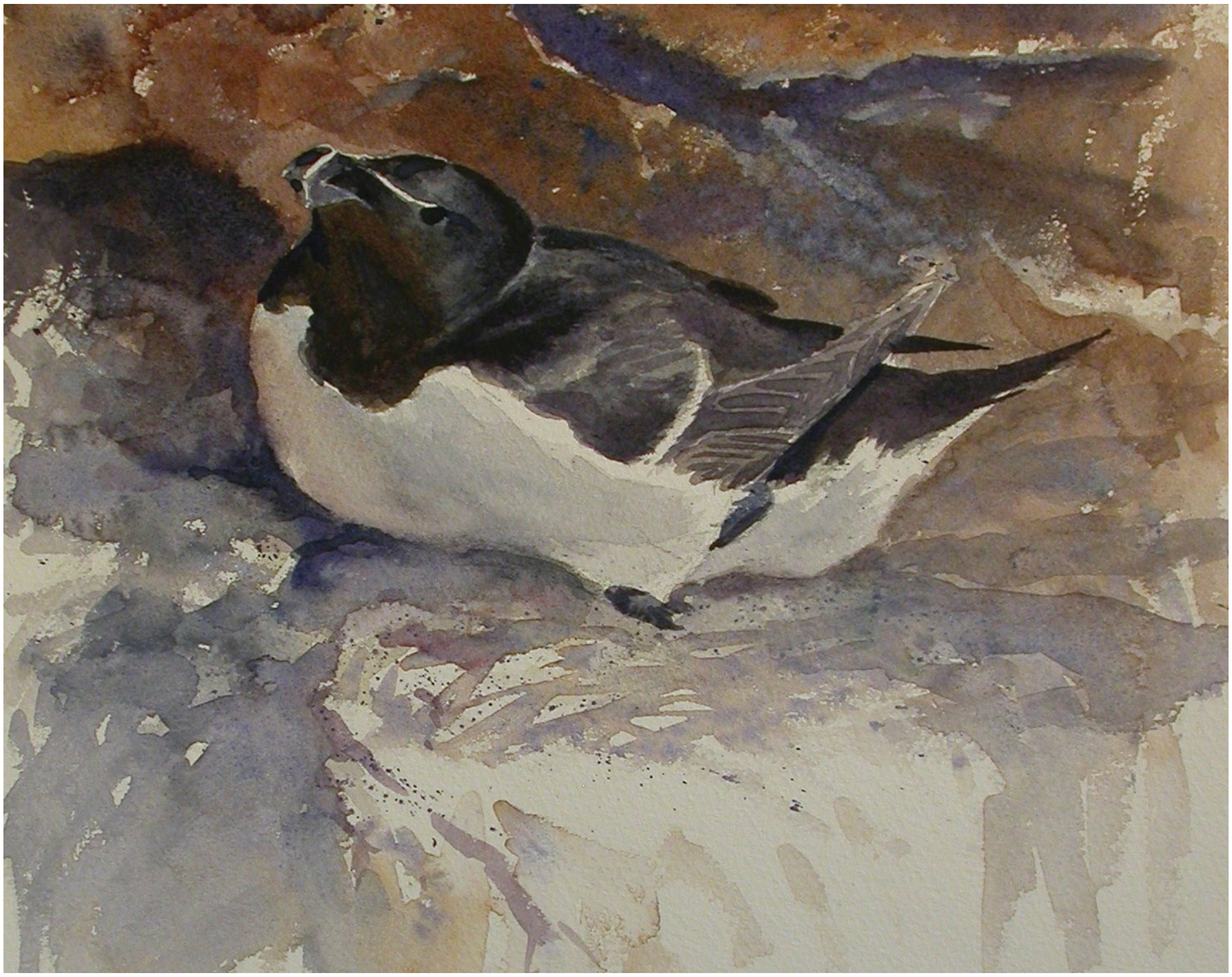
Auks tend to sit on their tarsi (the part of the foot below the ‘knee’) and so they shuffle about on the ledges. But they can stand properly on their toes and puffins especially are nimble little things when manoeuvring on land.

Puffins and razorbills (of which the now extinct great auk was one) have a horny sheath to their bills, which is grooved to help in holding sand eels and other small fish.

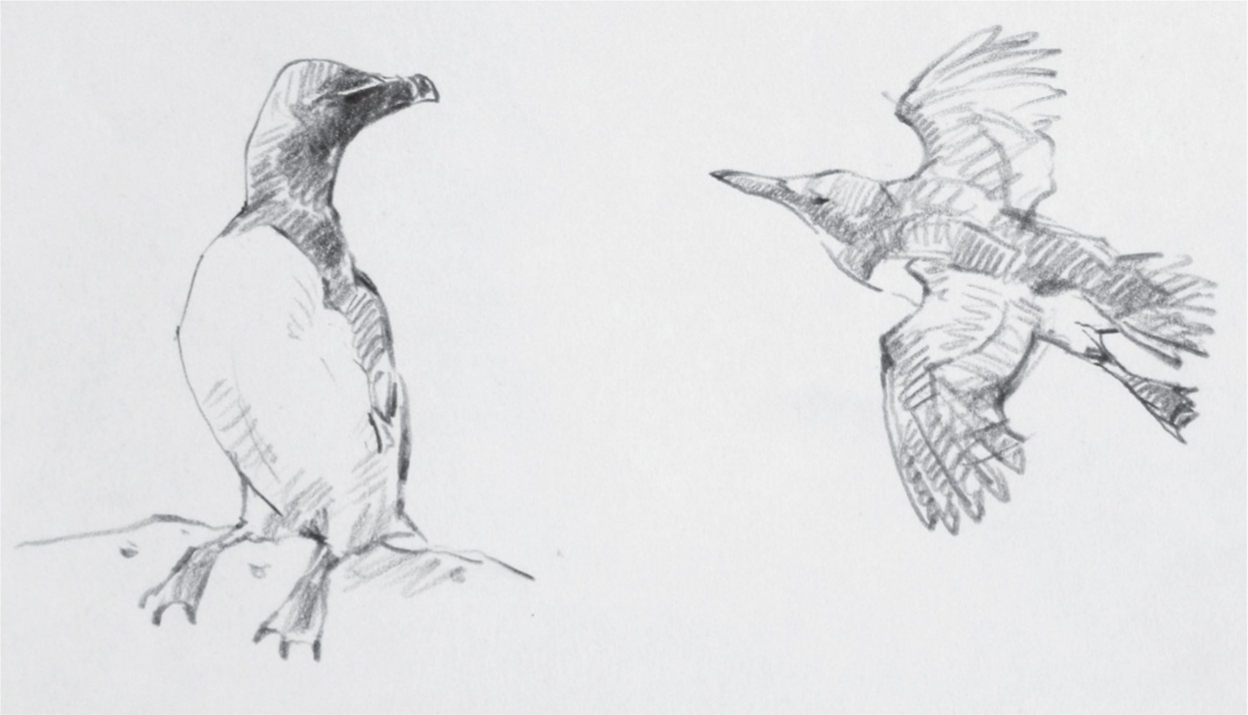


Tim Wootton: guillemot.

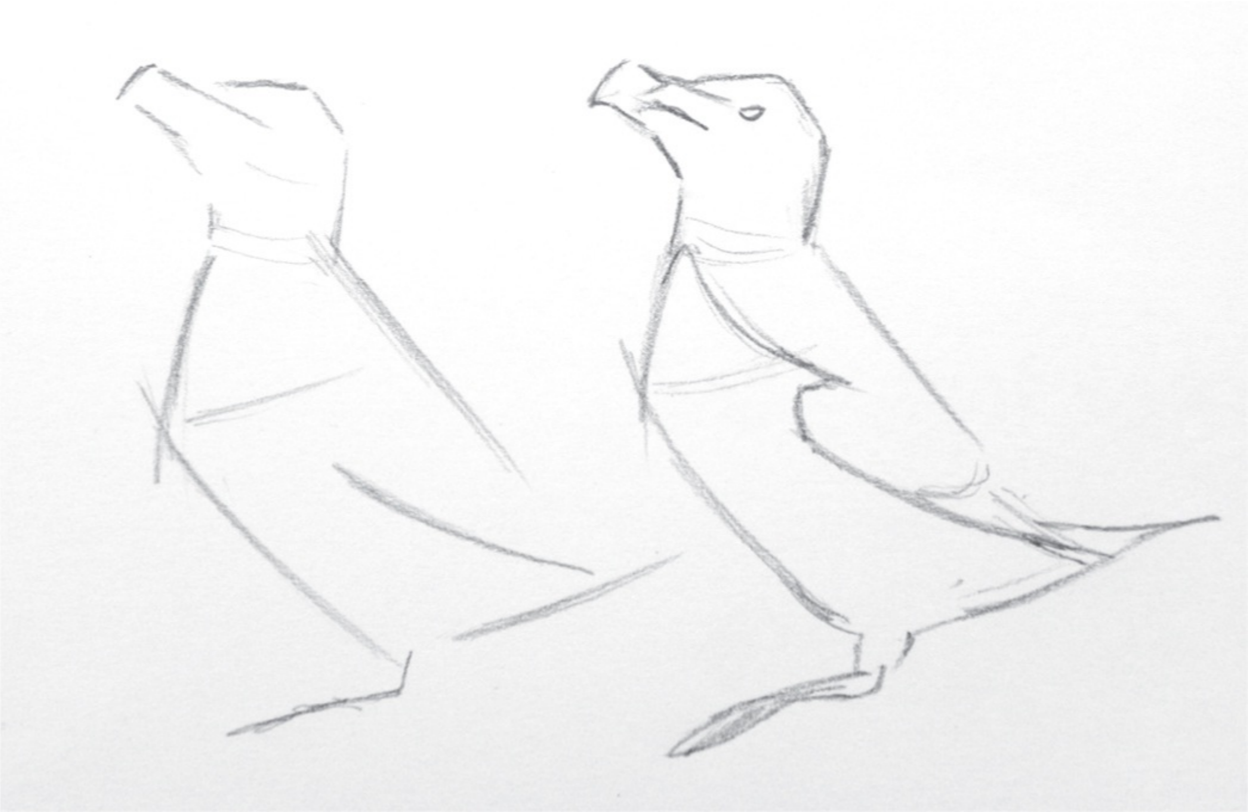
When drawing auks it is worth taking time over getting their bills correct. They have very sleek lines, particularly the guillemots, and ‘tight’ plumage which has a velvety-looking texture when they are dry, the flight feathers being somewhat glossier.



Tim Wootton: razorbill.



John Busby: razorbill and guillemot.

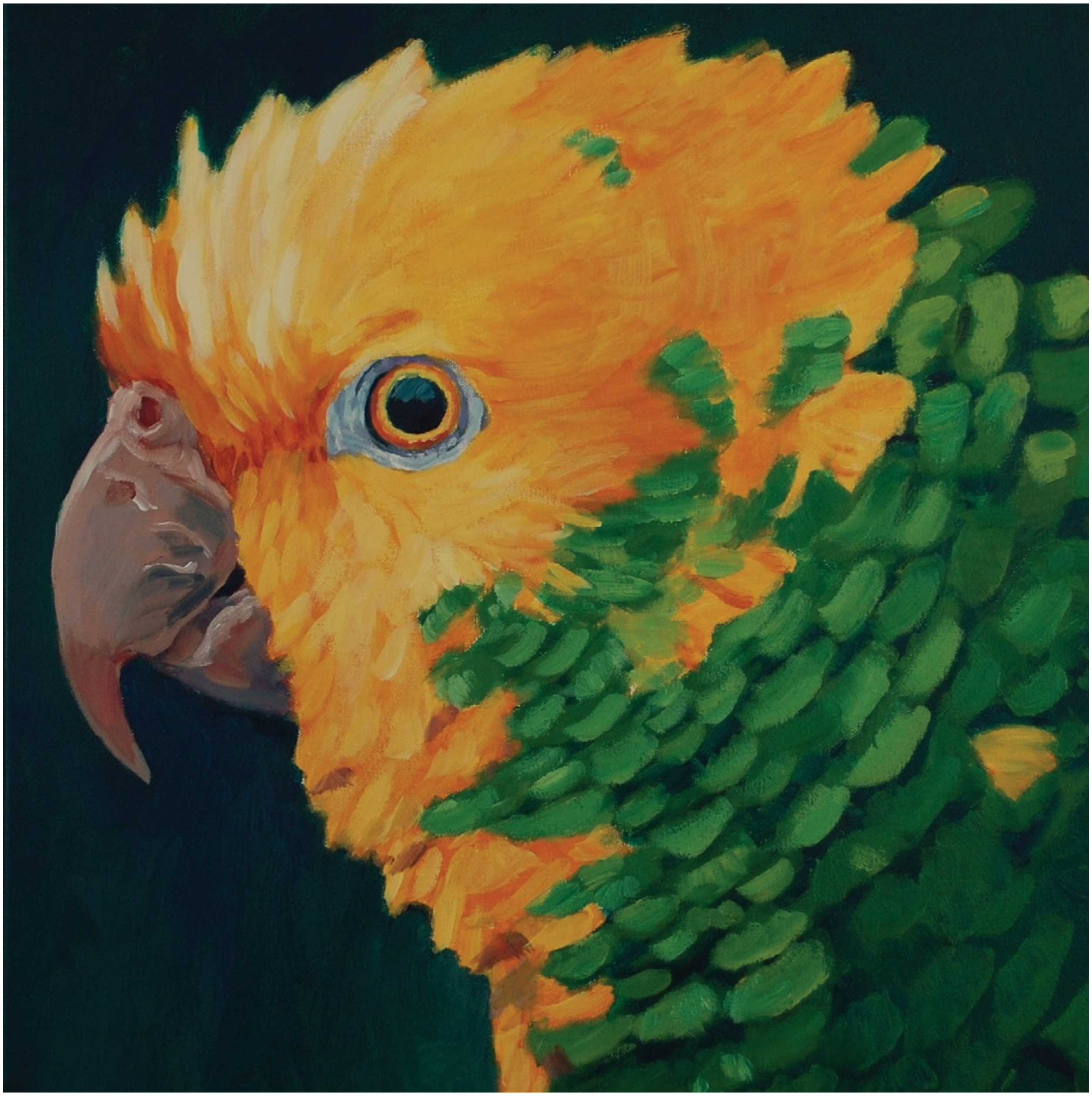


Tim Wootton: razorbill.

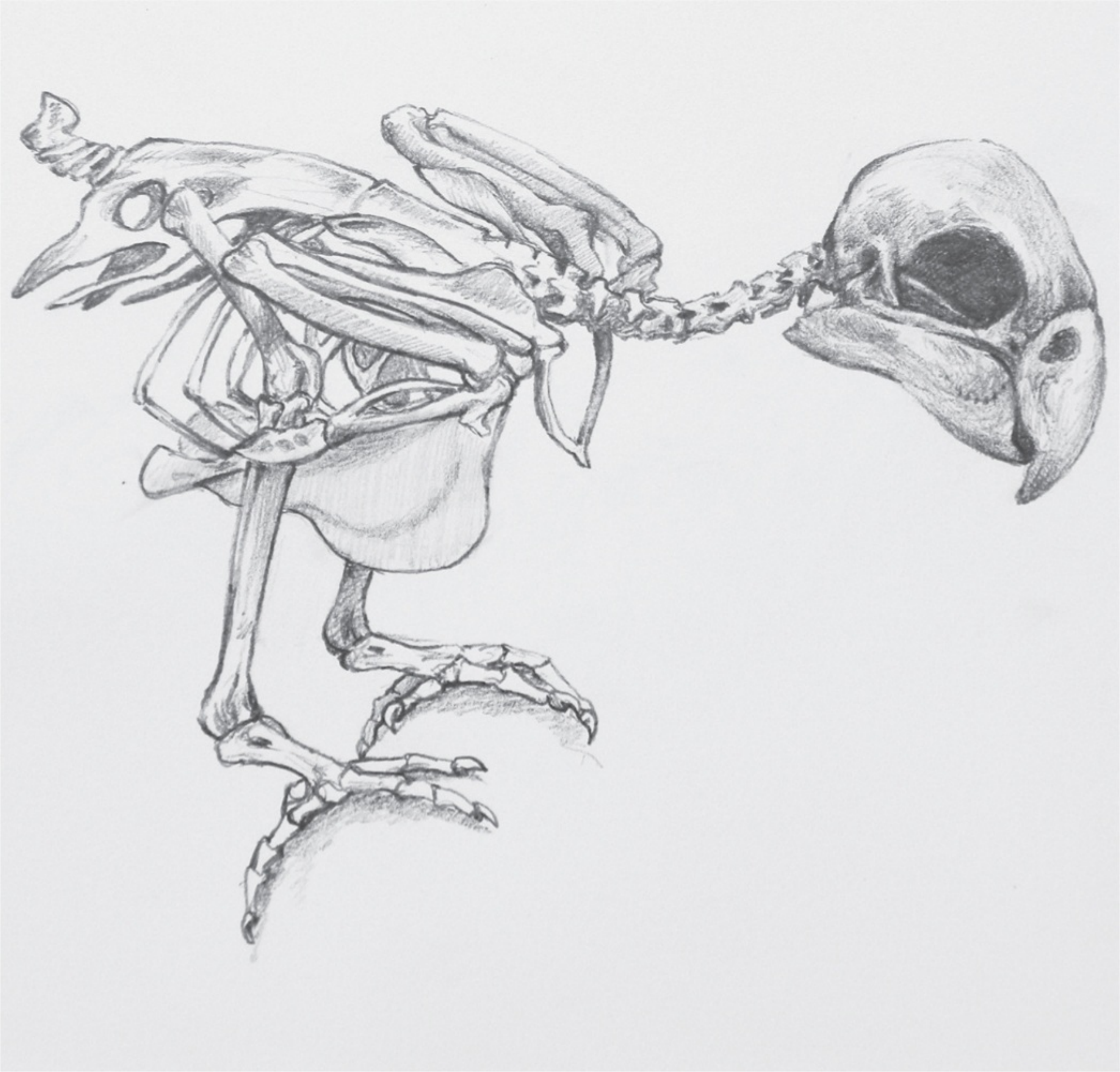
PARROTS

For many of us, contact with a member of the parrot family is probably a caged bird. They are very intelligent creatures with distinctive characters and if kept as pets can interact closely with their owners. Capturing these birds’ facial expressions would rank highly on any ‘must-do’ list when approaching drawing and painting them. Their ability to ‘talk’ affects the way we perceive them too, influencing the way we might make images of them.

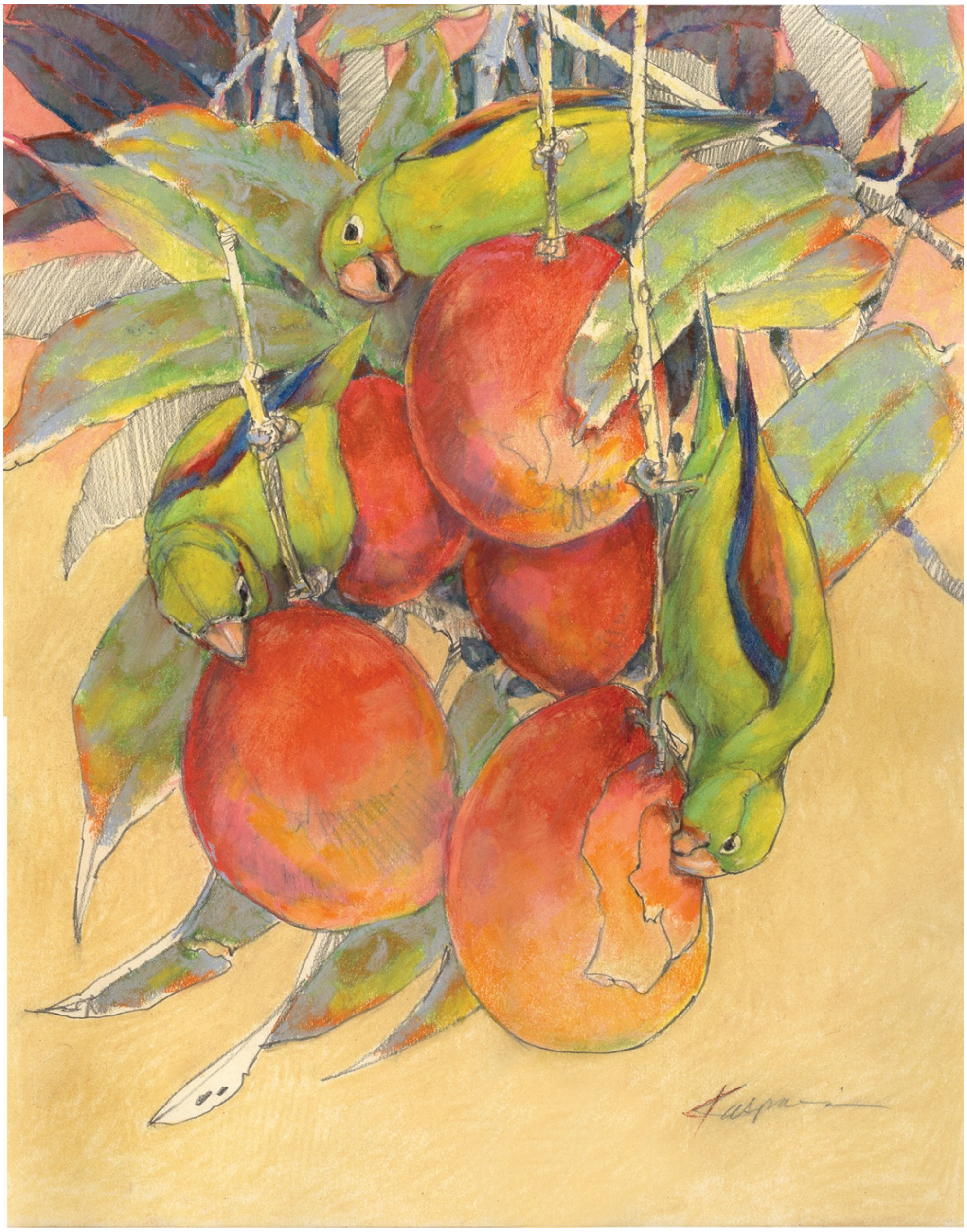
Many species are colourful with decorative plumes and splendid tail feathers. They typically have large heads with proportionately hefty bills, used for breaking open nuts and seeds and for eating fruits. Some species are predatory. As with owls, the arrangement of their eyes and large bill gives rise to slightly comical expressions.



Frank Van Boxtel: ***Kiwi Citron*** **(crested cockatoo).**



Tim Wootton: skeleton of a parrot.



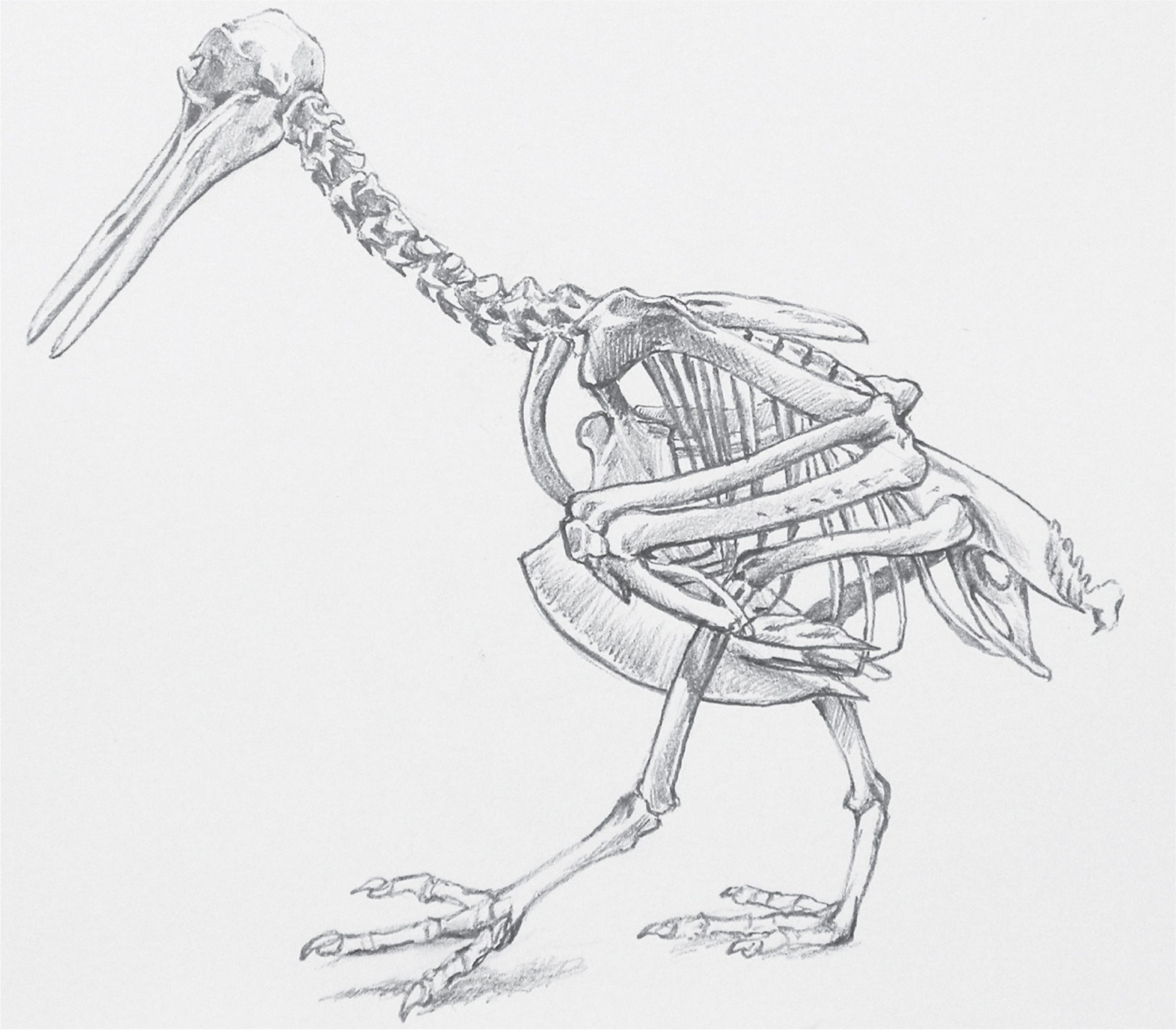
Debby Kaspari: orange-chin parakeets.

WADERS

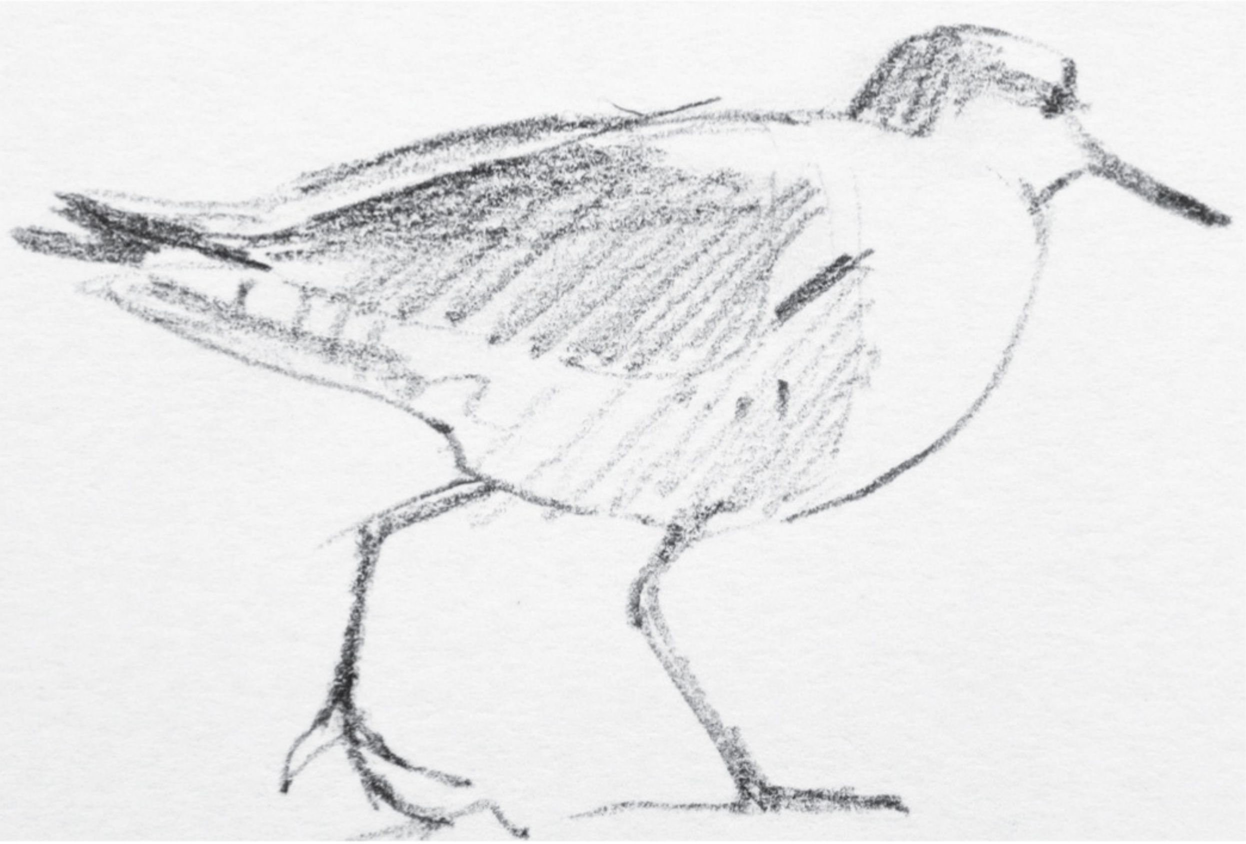
Wading birds are found the world over and generally have long legs and longish bills (although some of the plovers are shorter in the bill). They tend to probe soil, sand and mud for worms, invertebrates and crustaceans. As 'types' wading birds could include flamingos, herons, storks and cranes, curlews, godwits and oystercatchers down to the little plovers, stints and sandpipers. Most waders have nidifugous young – chicks that are able to disperse from the nest almost immediately after hatching.

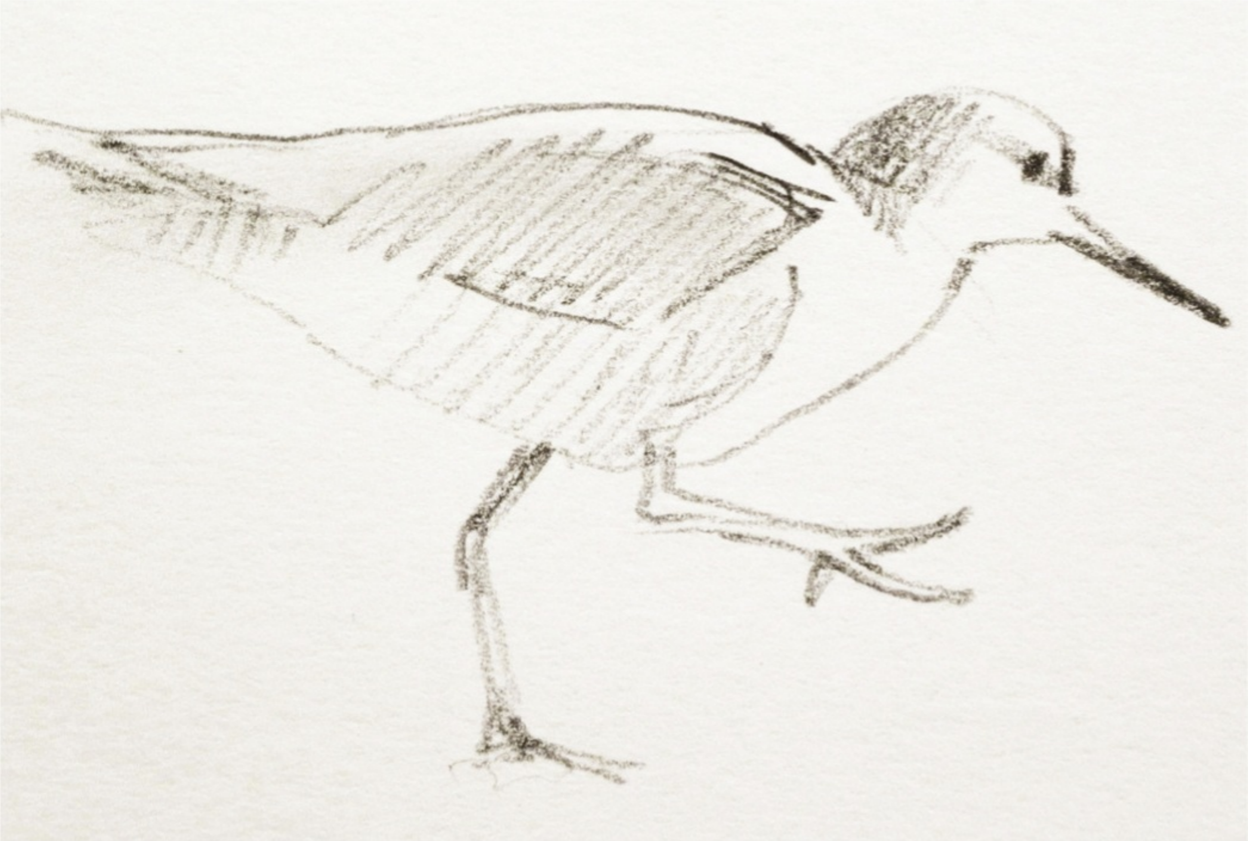
A familiar 'type' of wader is the oystercatcher, found as various species across North America through Europe and into Australasia. They are powerfully built medium-sized birds with long, thick bills, used to pick whelks and snails from crevices and to hammer through heavy mollusc shells.

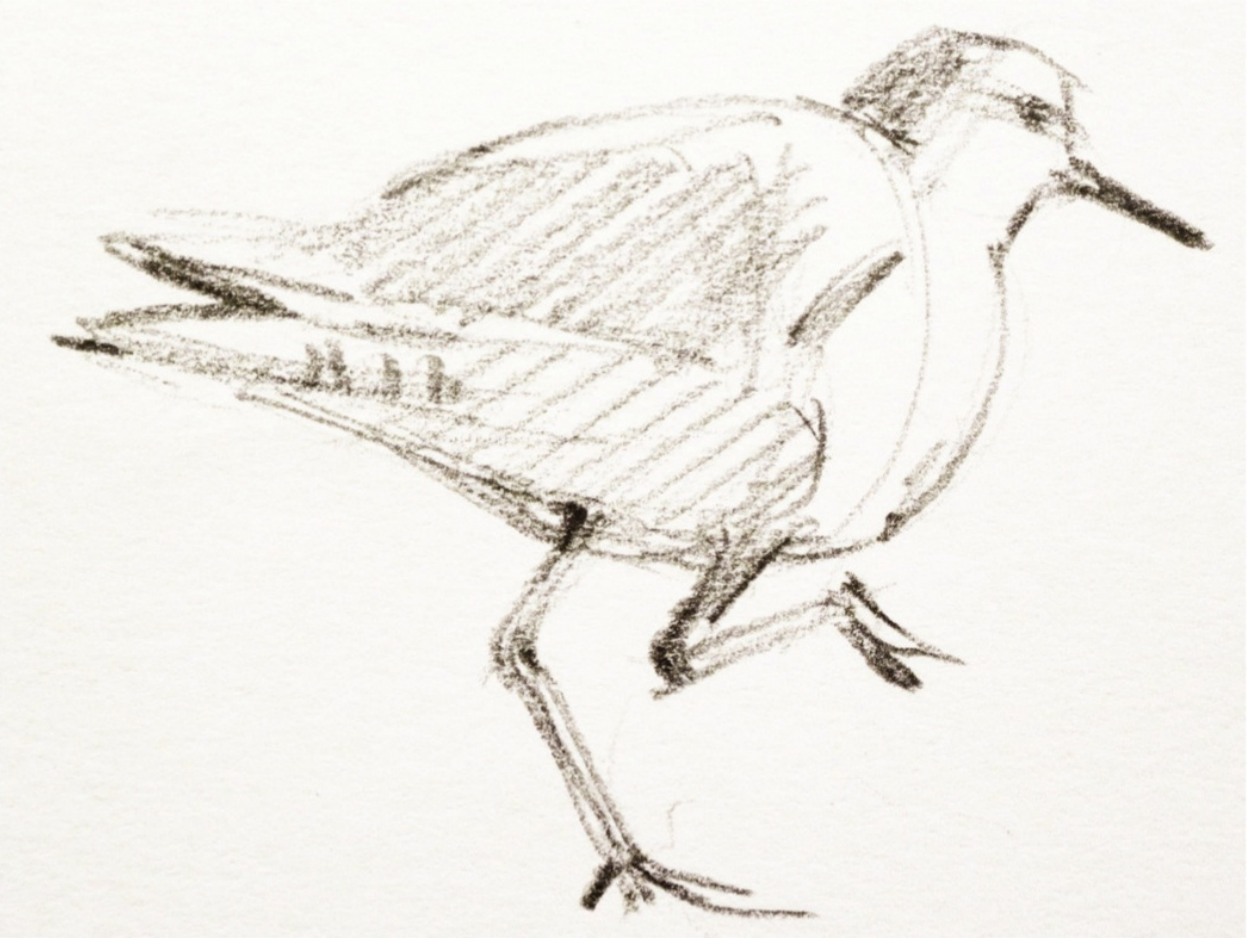
Because they spend much of their lives foraging for food items amongst rocks or in shallow water, drawing oystercatchers means the artist has to look for points of balance when drawing these (and other) waders. Most waders have an almost teardrop-shaped body, tapering to their wing tips with relatively long legs and necks, which make them amongst the most elegant of birds.

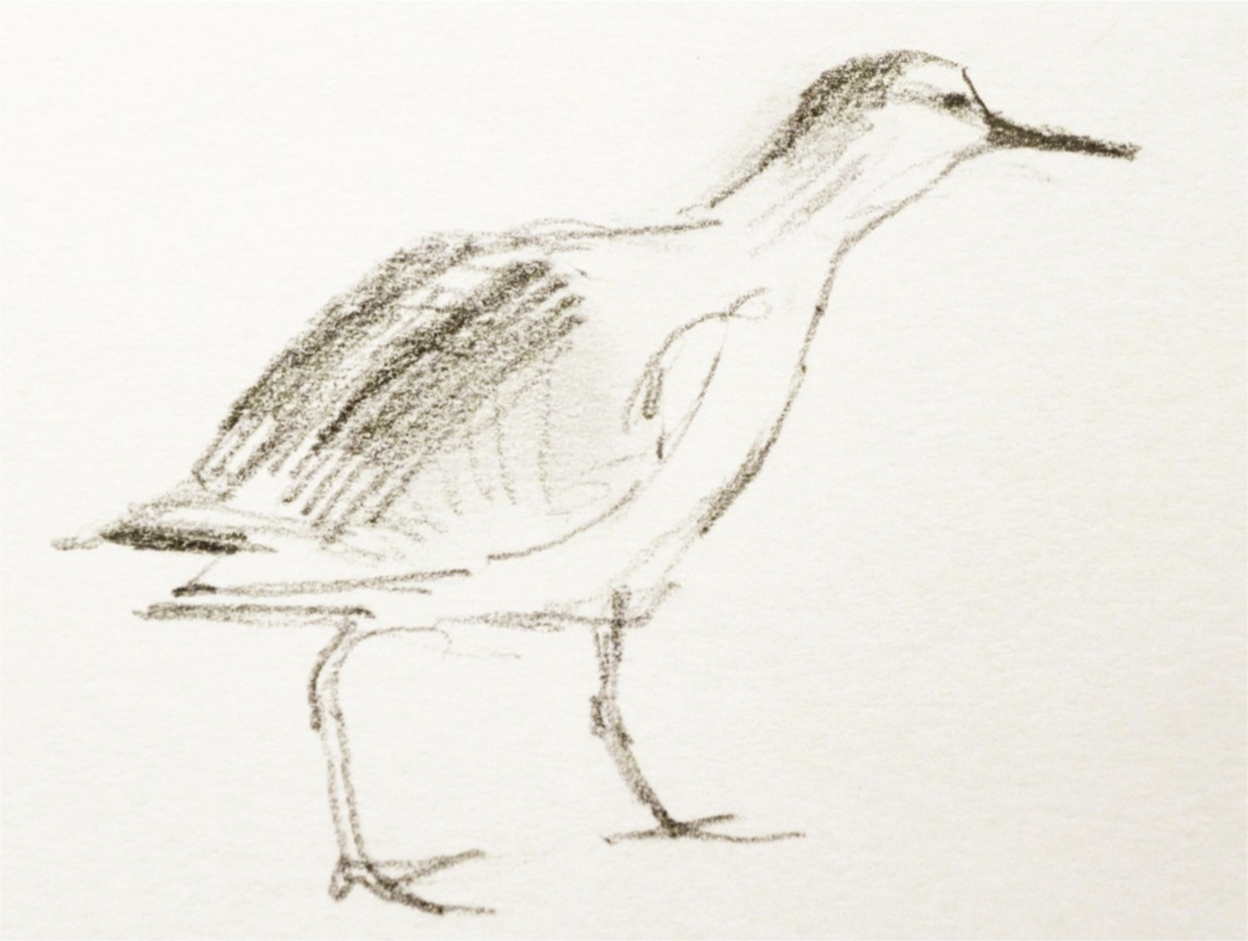


Tim Wootton: oystercatcher skeleton.



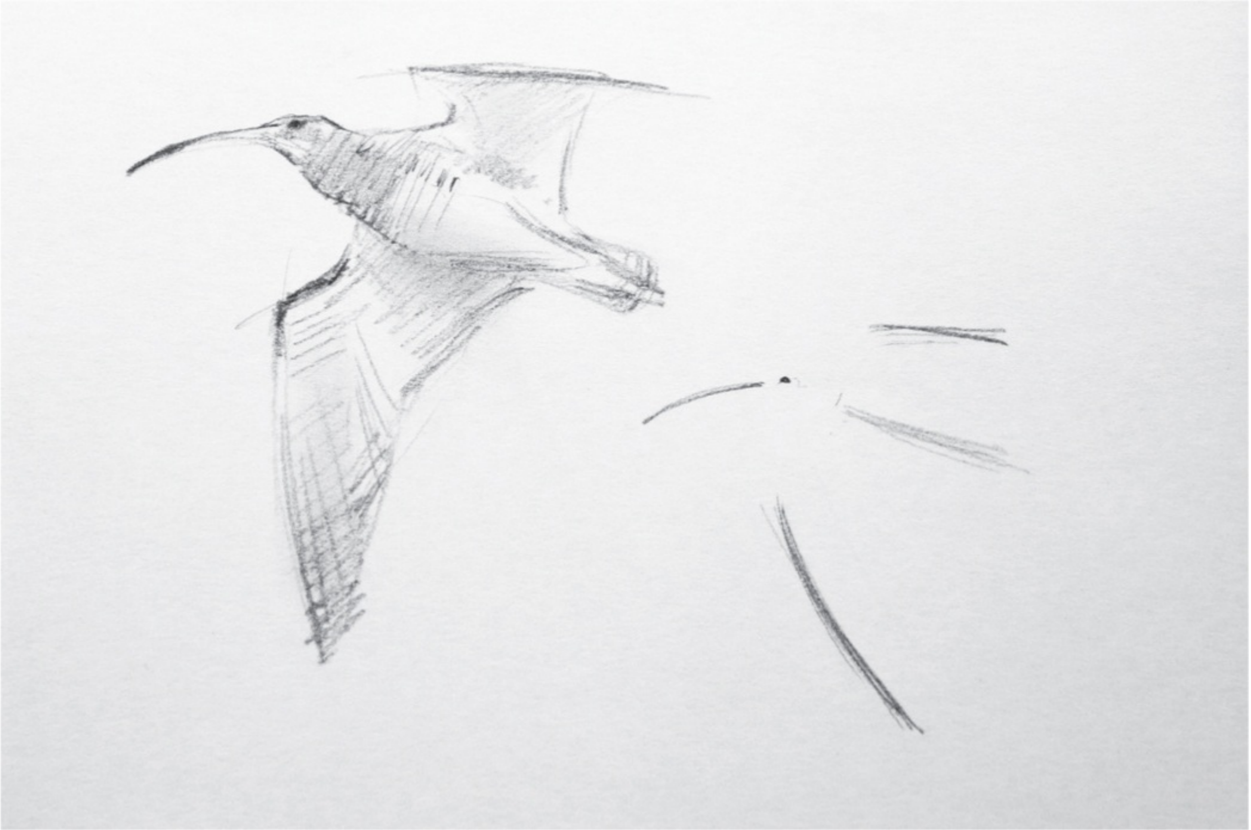




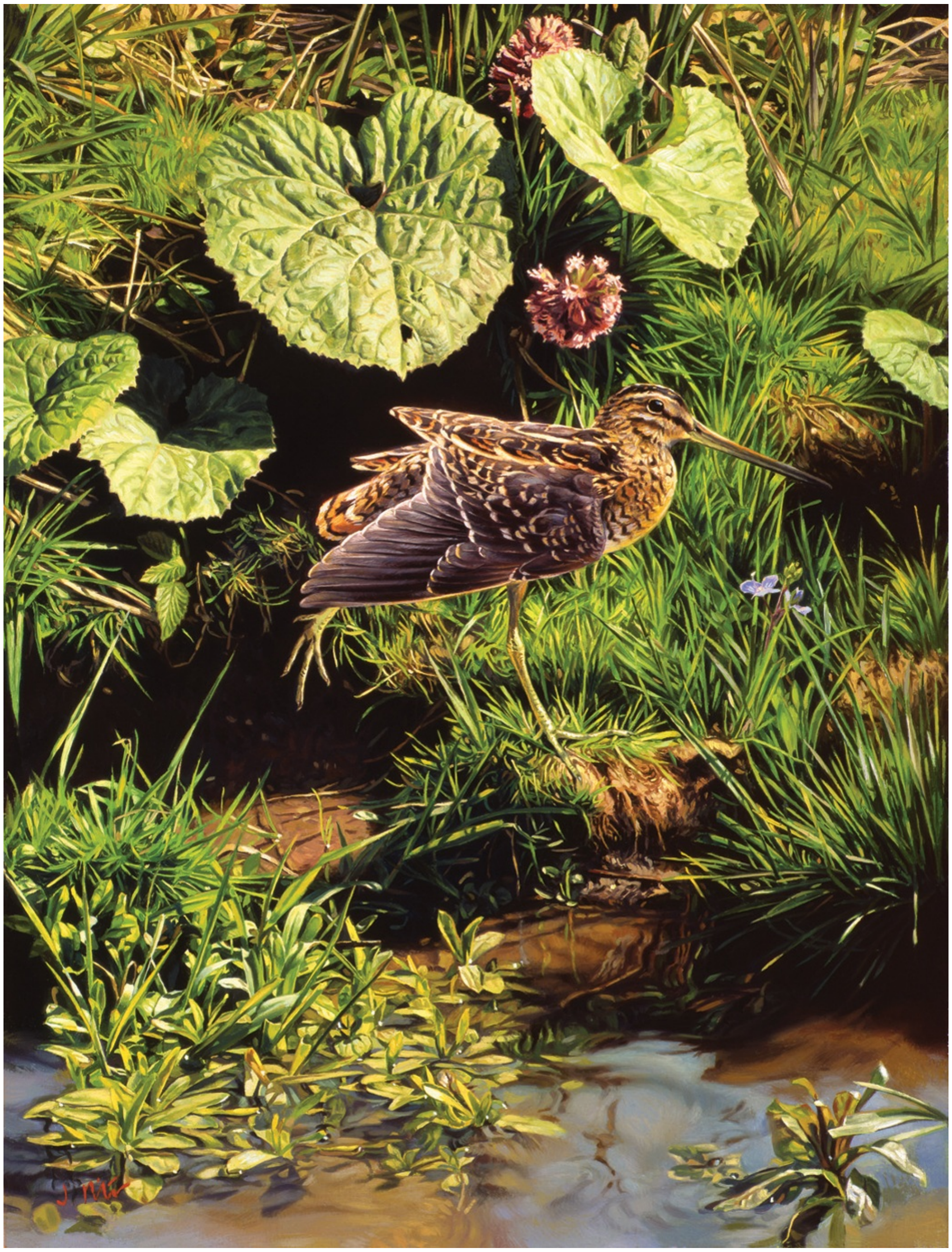


Tim Wootton: redshanks.

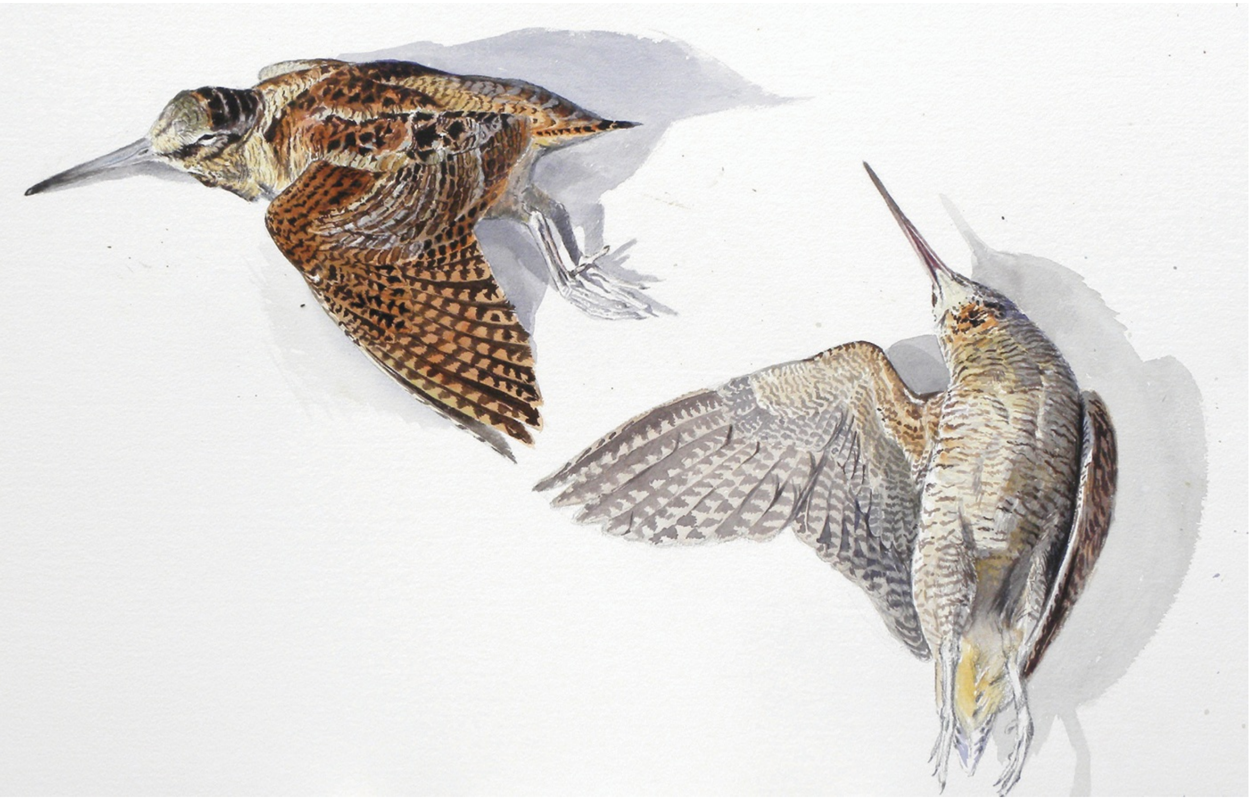
Tim Wootton: curlew.



Tim Wootton: curlew in flight.



Jonathan Pointer: snipe and butterbur.



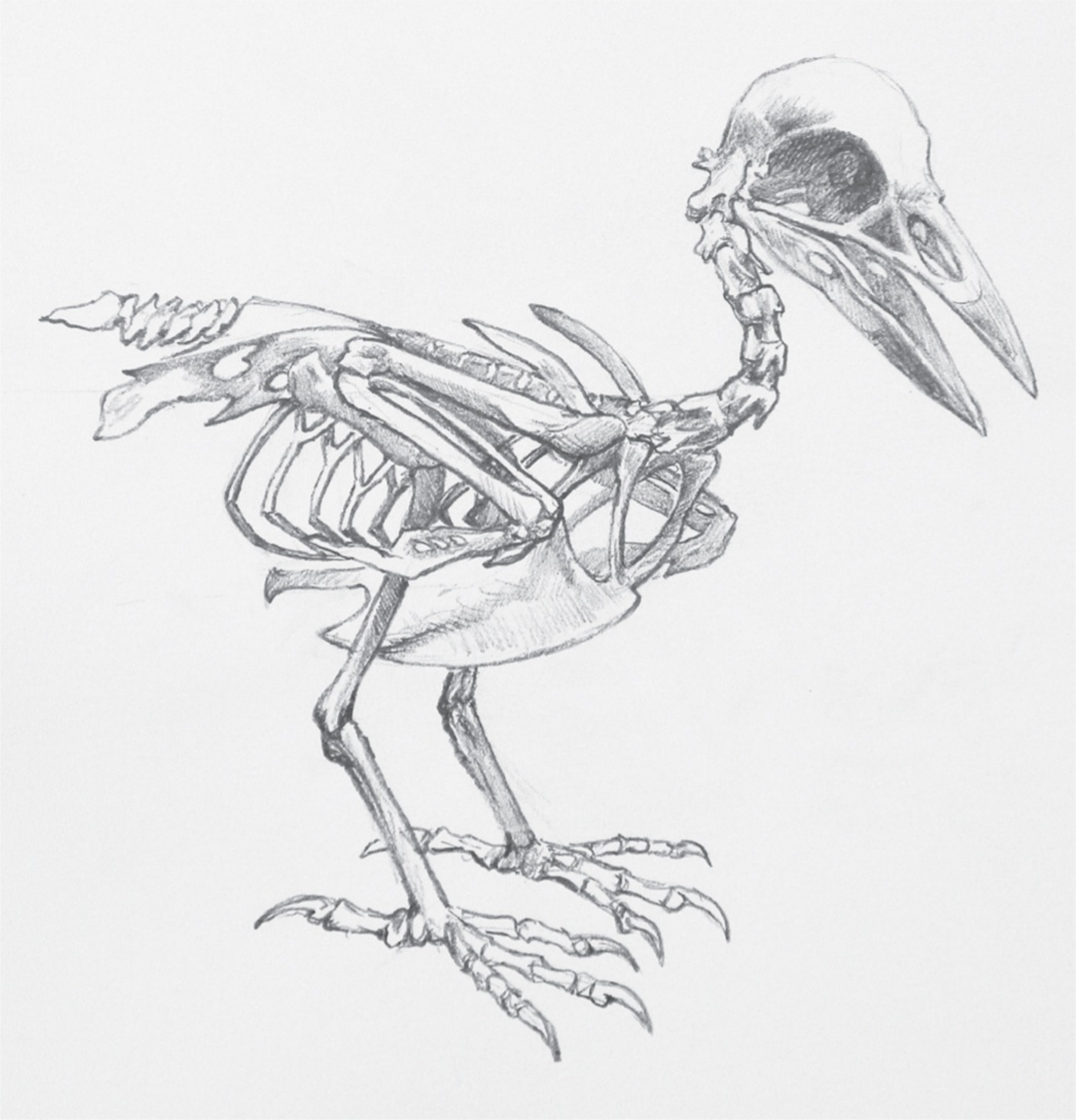
Tim Wootton: post-mortem study of a European woodcock.

CORVIDS

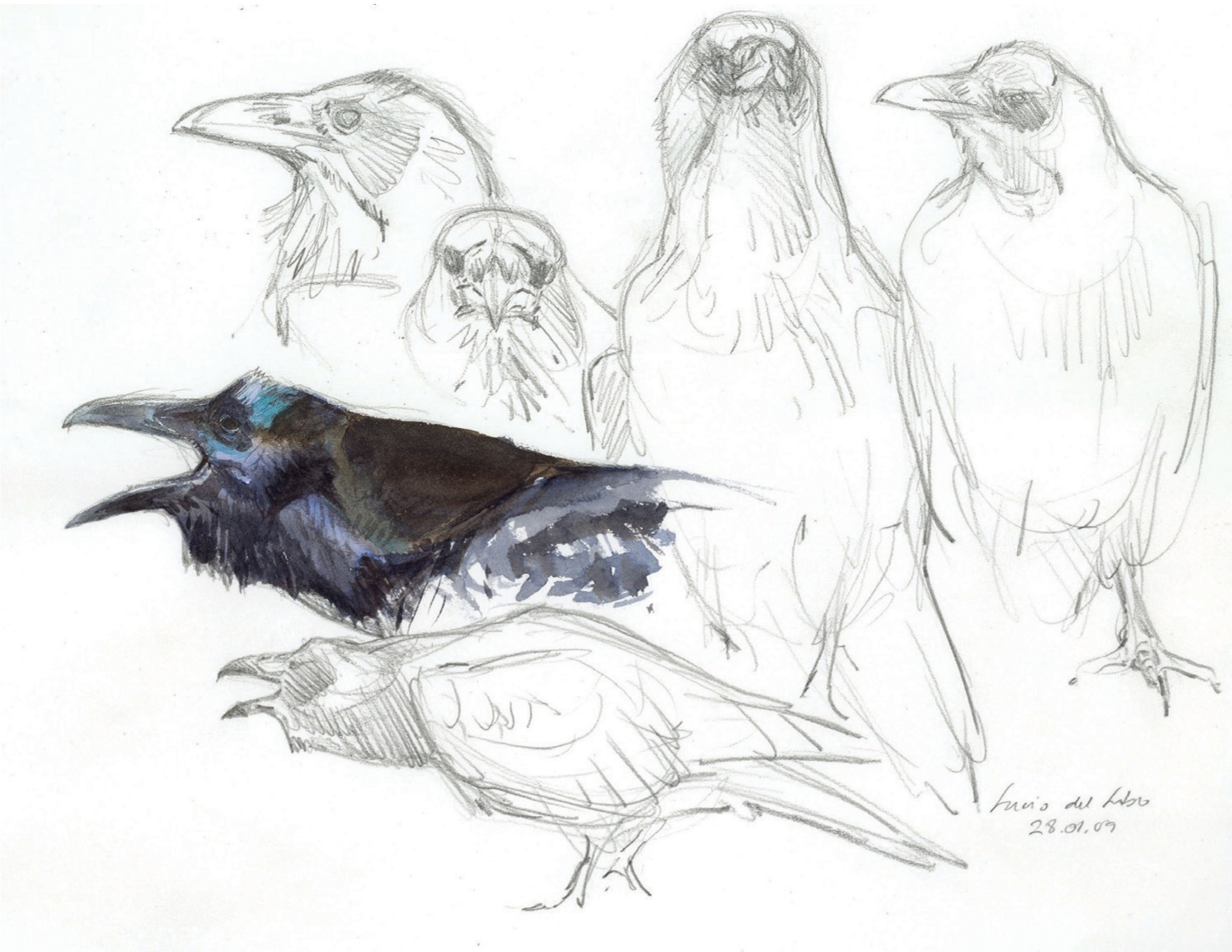
Members of the crow family are found almost everywhere and as well as being famously intelligent are also quite easy to approach and study. Rooks especially can be compliant models, particularly in early spring when they are refurbishing their colonial nests at the ‘rookery’. Crows are long-lived and are faithful to nesting sites; most crows will use traditional nest sites, re-using the same site and in some cases the same nest year after year. This aspect of their behaviour is sometimes reflected in place names that relate to their presence in an area. It also means that locating them for the purposes of study is fairly easy.

They are the largest of the ‘passerines’ (perching birds) and although typically represented by black birds, the family also has some of the most strikingly patterned and colourful members too. They are recognized as being symbolic of evil and death, occurring in literature and film from Shakespeare to *The Omen* and *The Birds*.

They have thick and powerful bills, large heads and a deep-bodied appearance, partly due to having ‘boots’ (heavily feathered legs). Rooks in particular can have a triangular appearance.

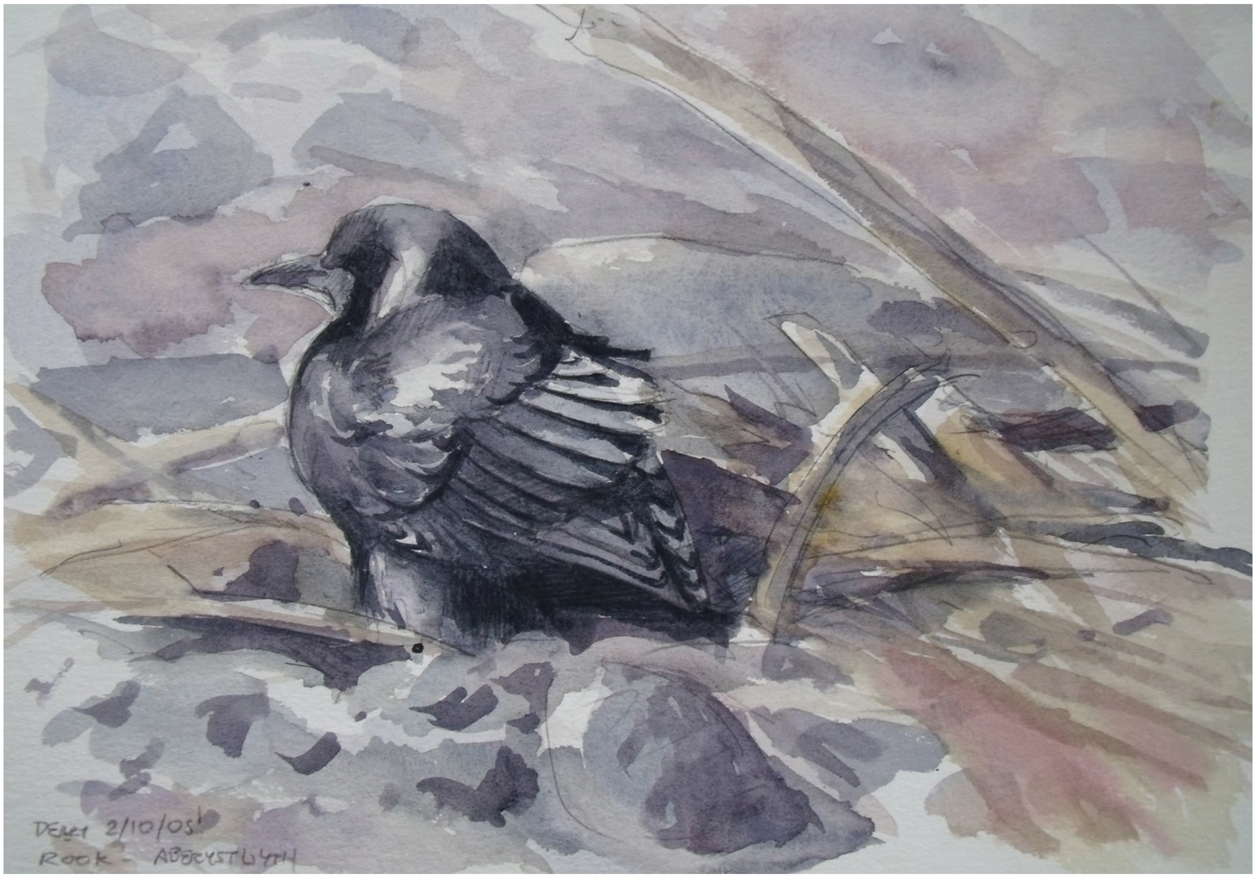


Tim Wootton: skeleton of a rook.

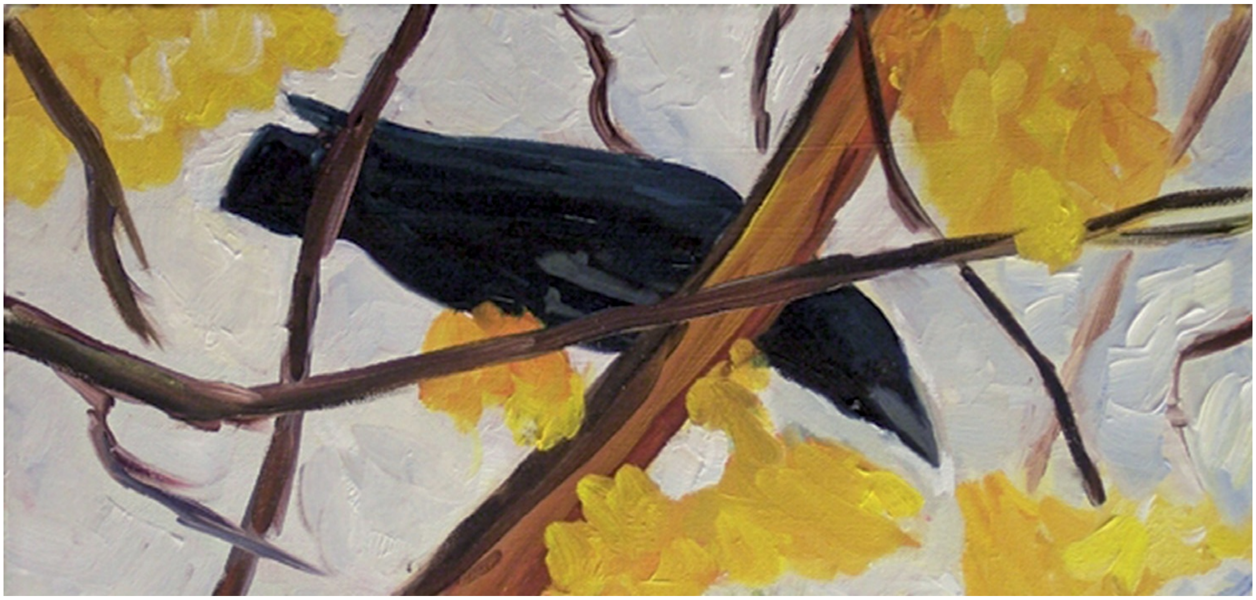


Lucio del Lobo
28.01.09

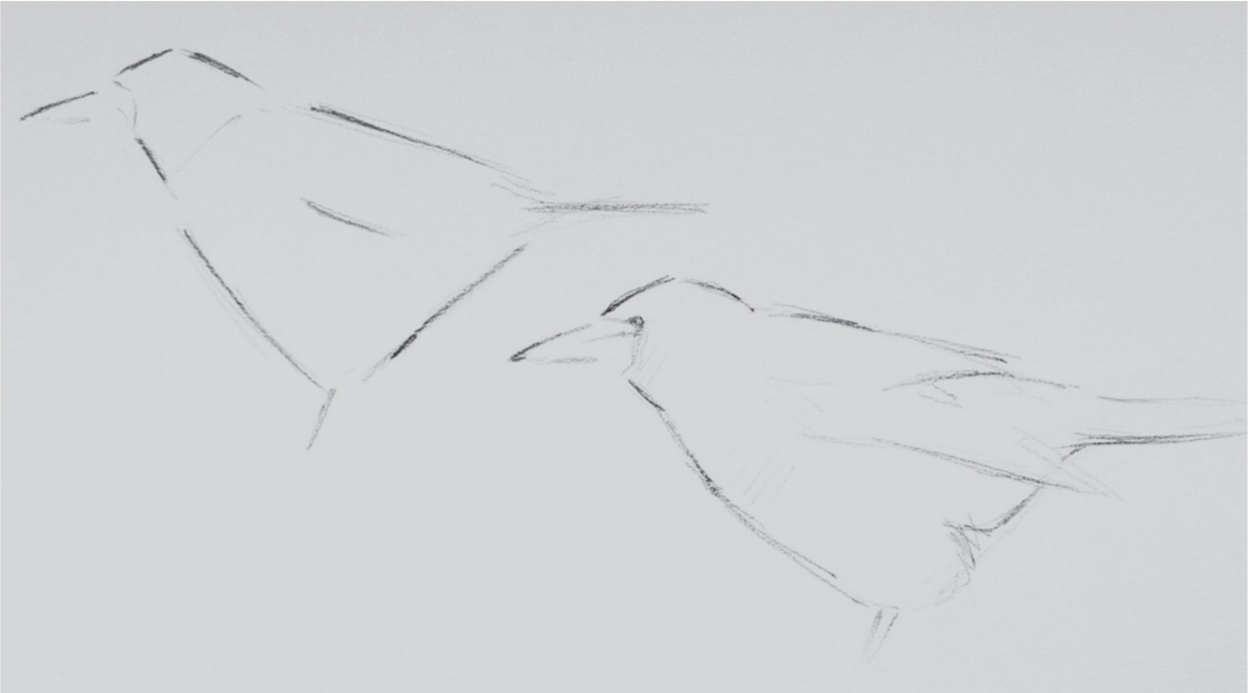
Juan Varela: studies of ravens. (First published in *Entre Mar y Tierra*/*Between Sea and Land*, Lynx Edicions, Barcelona.)

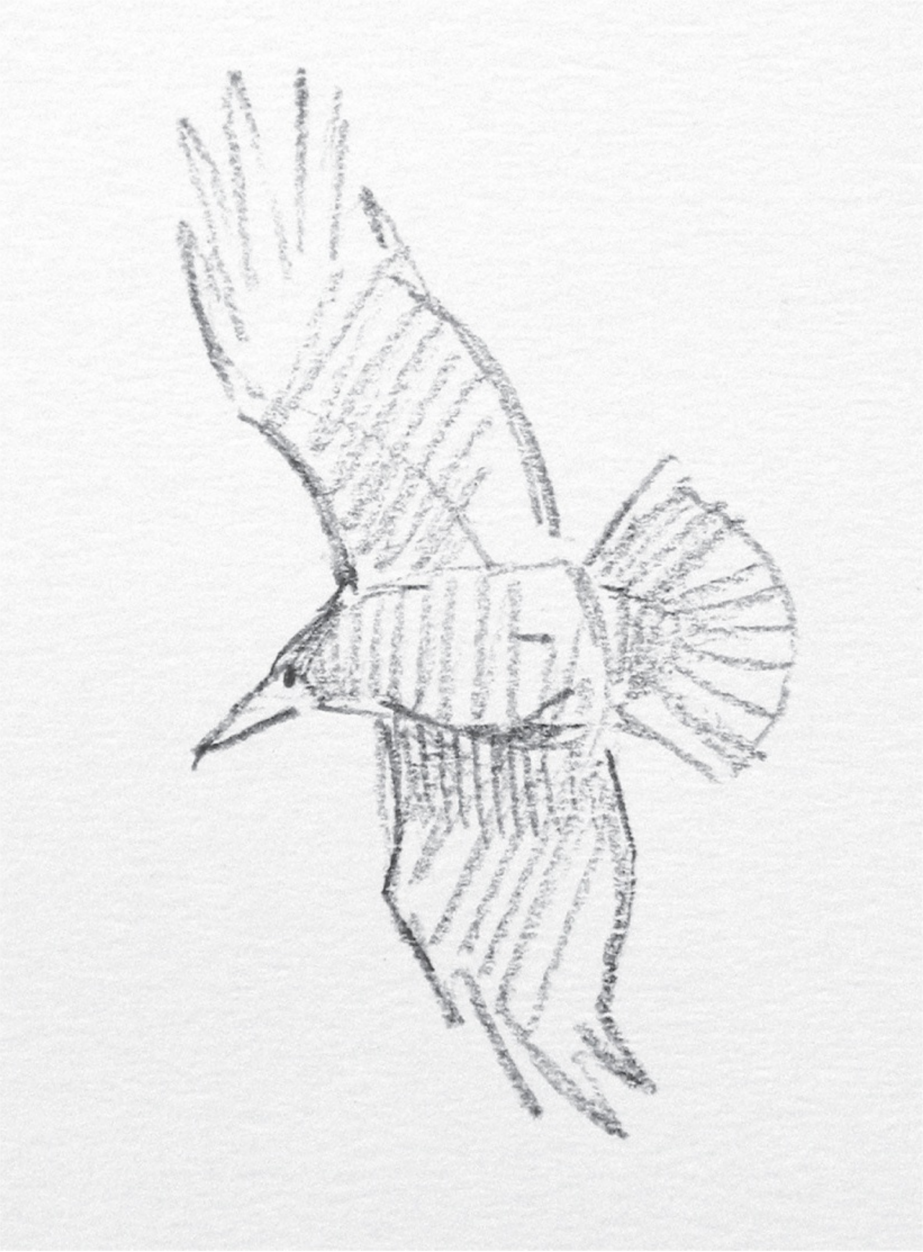

DERRY 2/10/05
ROOK - ABERYSTWYTH

Nick Derry: rook.

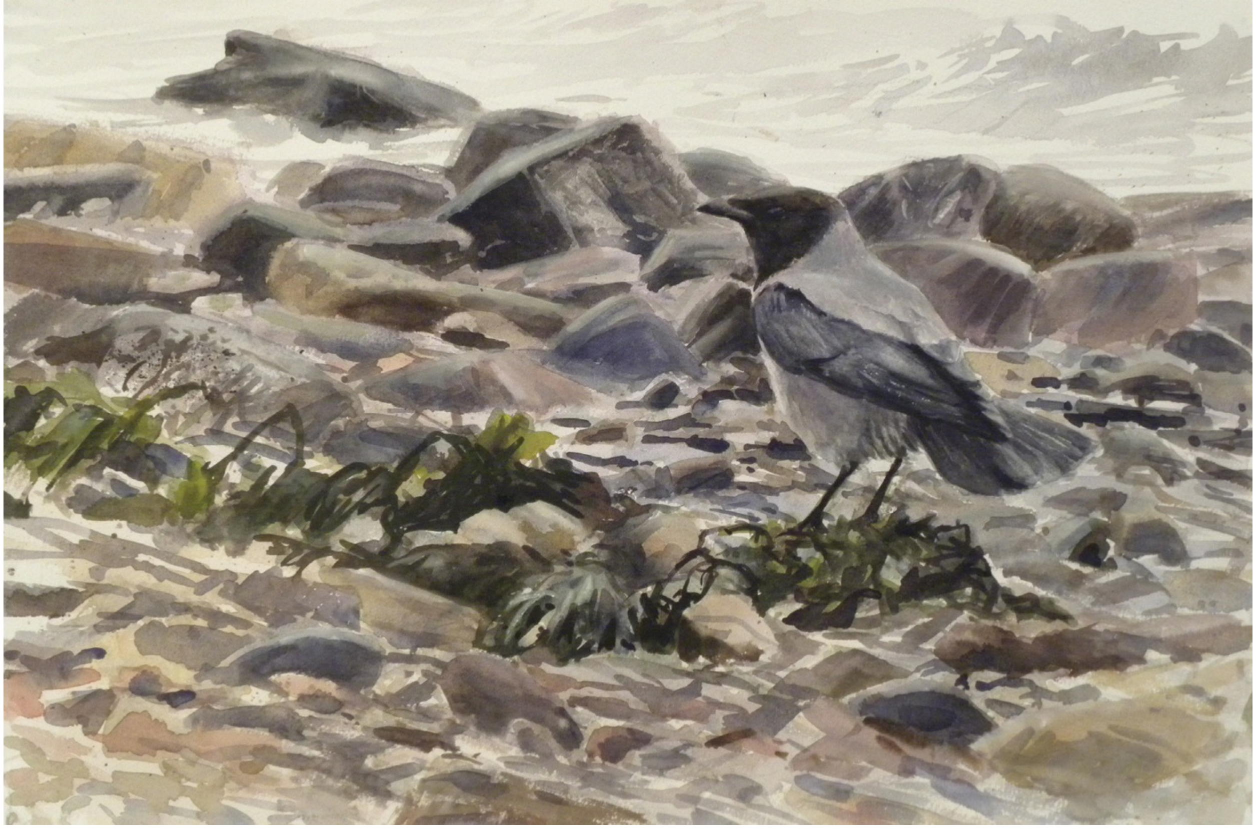


Beth Rosenkoetter: crow.





Tim Wootton: rooks.

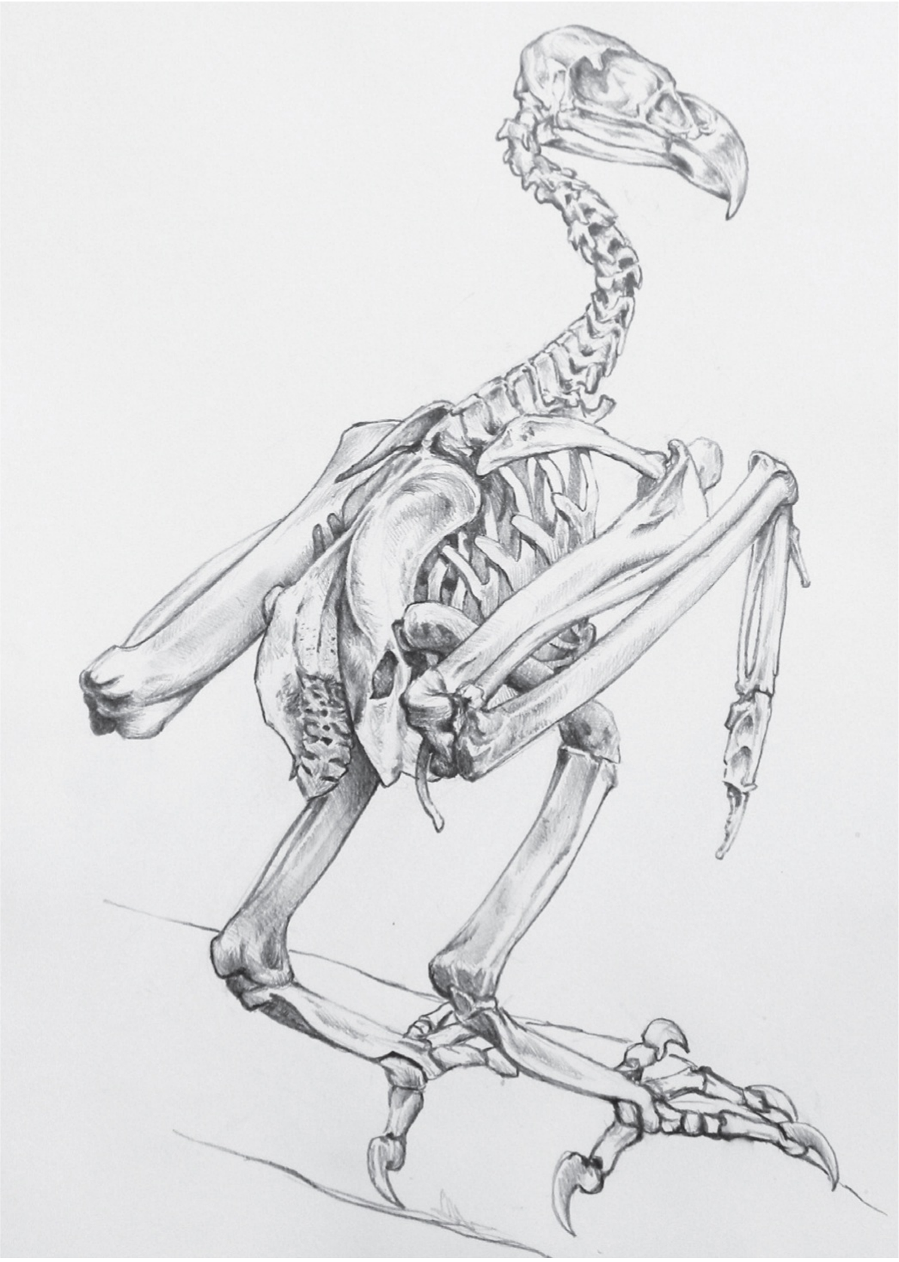


Tim Wootton: hooded crow.

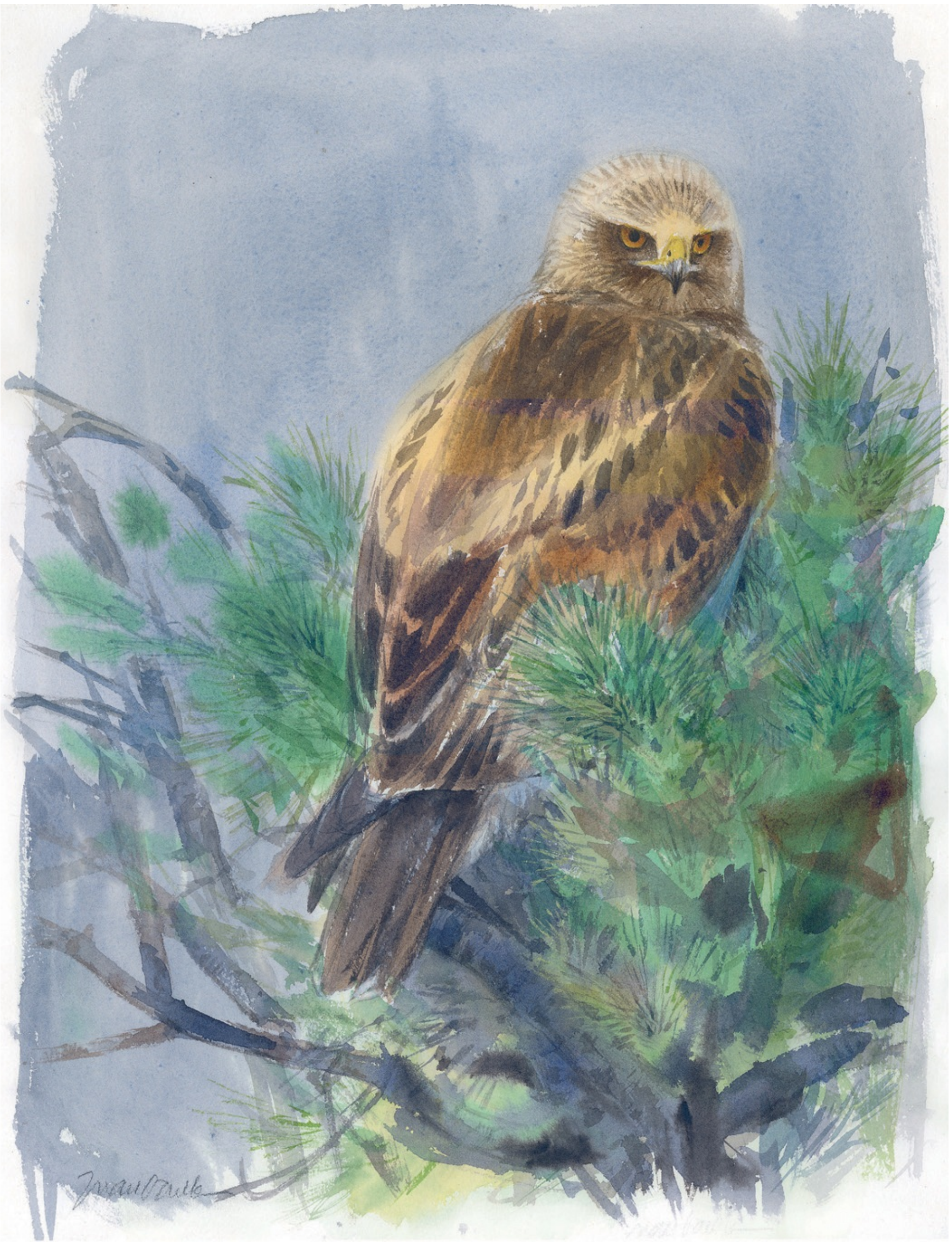
EAGLES AND OTHER LARGE BIRDS OF PREY

The skeleton of an eagle tells much about its way of life. Immense wing bones and an extremely strong backbone reveal its aerial prowess but it may come as something of a surprise to see the enormous leg bones. Of course they need strong legs to hold up a heavy body, but that doesn’t explain these massive structures. To do that, we need to consider what these birds feed on and how they go about catching their food.

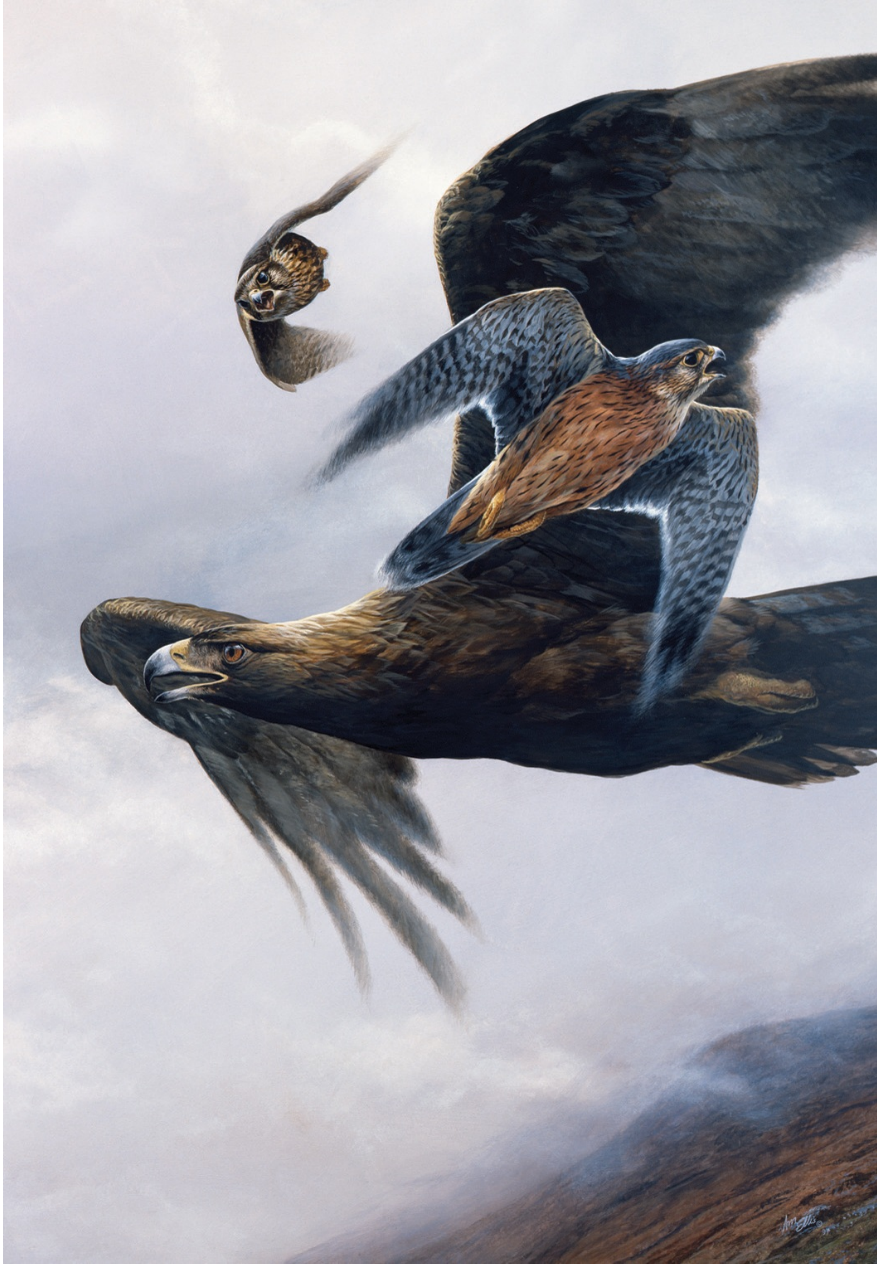
The skeleton illustrated is that of a white-tailed sea eagle, a bird with an enormous wingspan (often described as a ‘flying barn door’ when seen in the field). They feed on fish and seabirds which they catch on the water surface. Other eagles feed on mammals such as rabbits, small deer and even monkeys, some on snakes and lizards and other birds. What they have in common is that they generally catch their prey following a high-speed pursuit, hitting their target with their ferociously armed feet. The impact is violent and the eagle needs powerful legs and feet, both to make the catch and to withstand the impact.



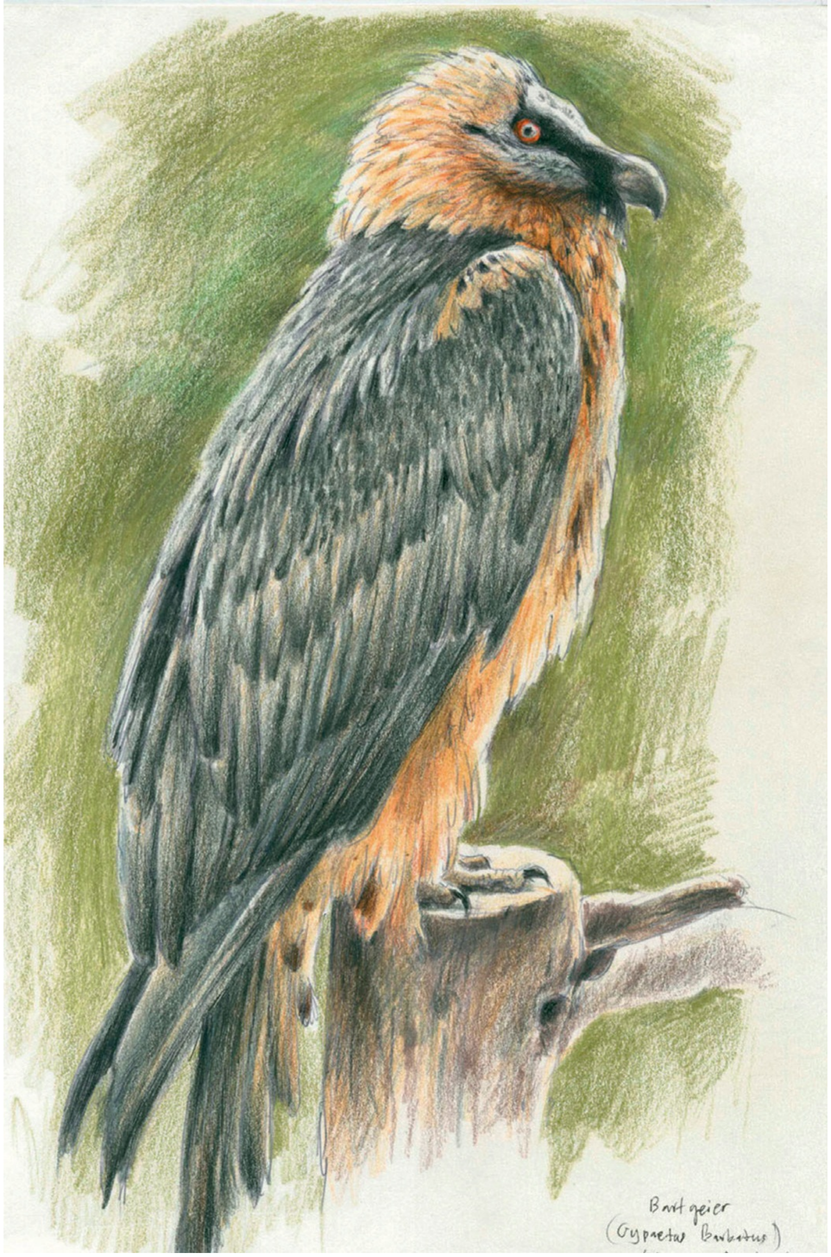
Tim Wootton: skeleton of a white-tailed eagle.



Juan Varela: booted eagle.



Andrew Ellis: golden eagle being mobbed by a merlin pair.



Paschalis Dougalis: bearded vulture.

They have wickedly hooked bills ideally adapted to ripping flesh, and fierce eyes with excellent vision with which to locate their prey. Any rendition having an eagle as the subject will need to suggest great bulk and power and catch the facial expression correctly. The eyes are deep-set and are browed heavily, emphasizing the piercing look. There are also areas of coloured bare skin around the eyes and bill, a feature common in most birds of prey.

In flight they have distinctive primary feathers referred to as ‘fingers’, the arrangement of which can aid identification. Forms in this group include eagles, vultures, large buzzards and other hawks.

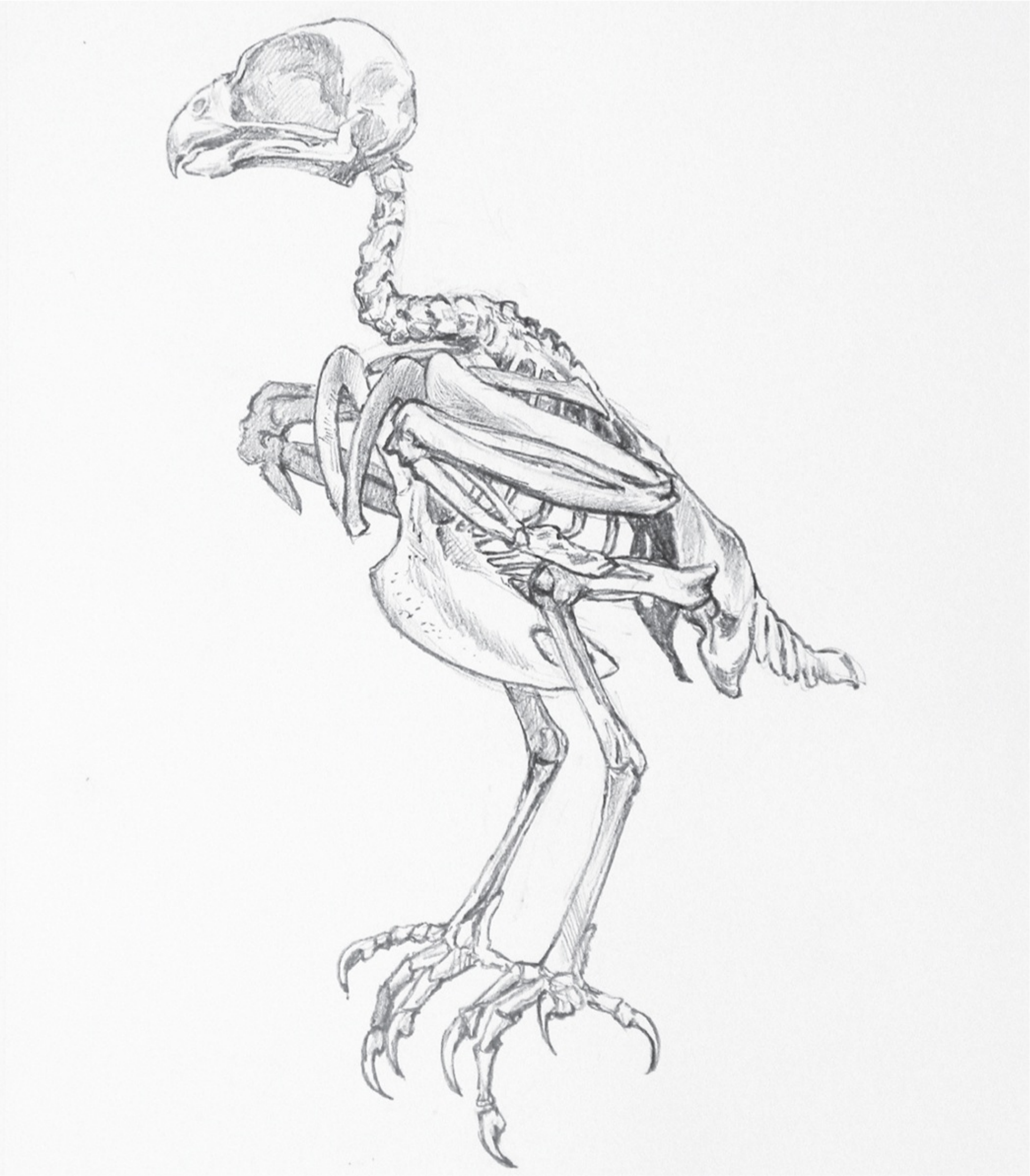
HAWKS AND FALCONS

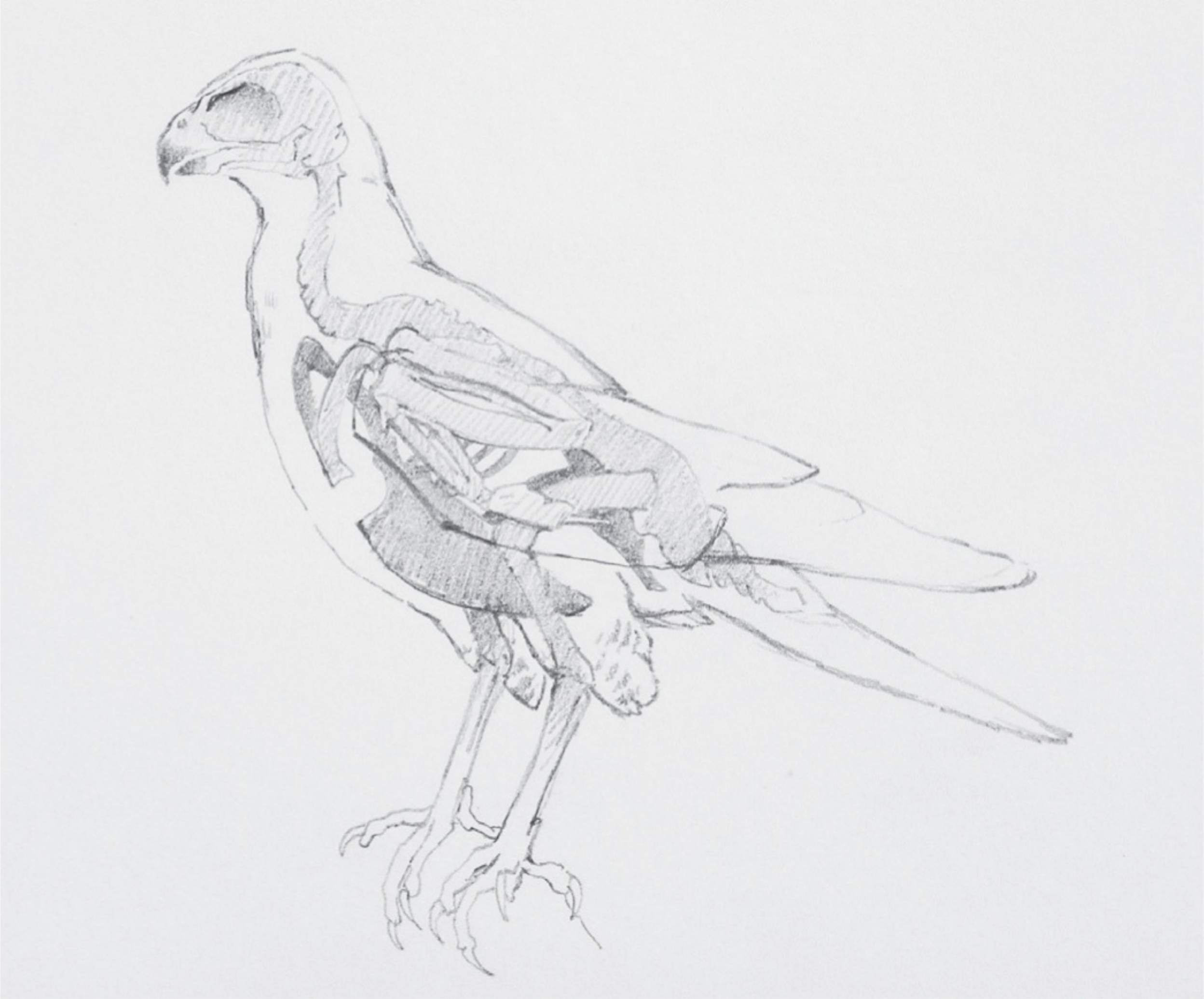
Although in ornithological terms hawks and falcons have many differences, for the sake of identifying the salient features they can be grouped together.

They show the classic body shape of the avian predator: they have a teardrop-shaped body and are powerfully built across the shoulders.

These birds are all about speed and agility and amongst their number are the fastest creatures on earth. Their wings are visible at rest; indeed much of these birds’ anatomical features are well defined. Because of the popularity of falconry, good views of these otherwise elusive birds are readily available at places such as country parks, stately homes and other specialist collections and aviaries. The structure of their wings is revealed at feeding time. The birds habitually hold their wings over their food, in effect cloaking it (an action called ‘mantling’) when the angles of each wing joint can be deciphered quite well.

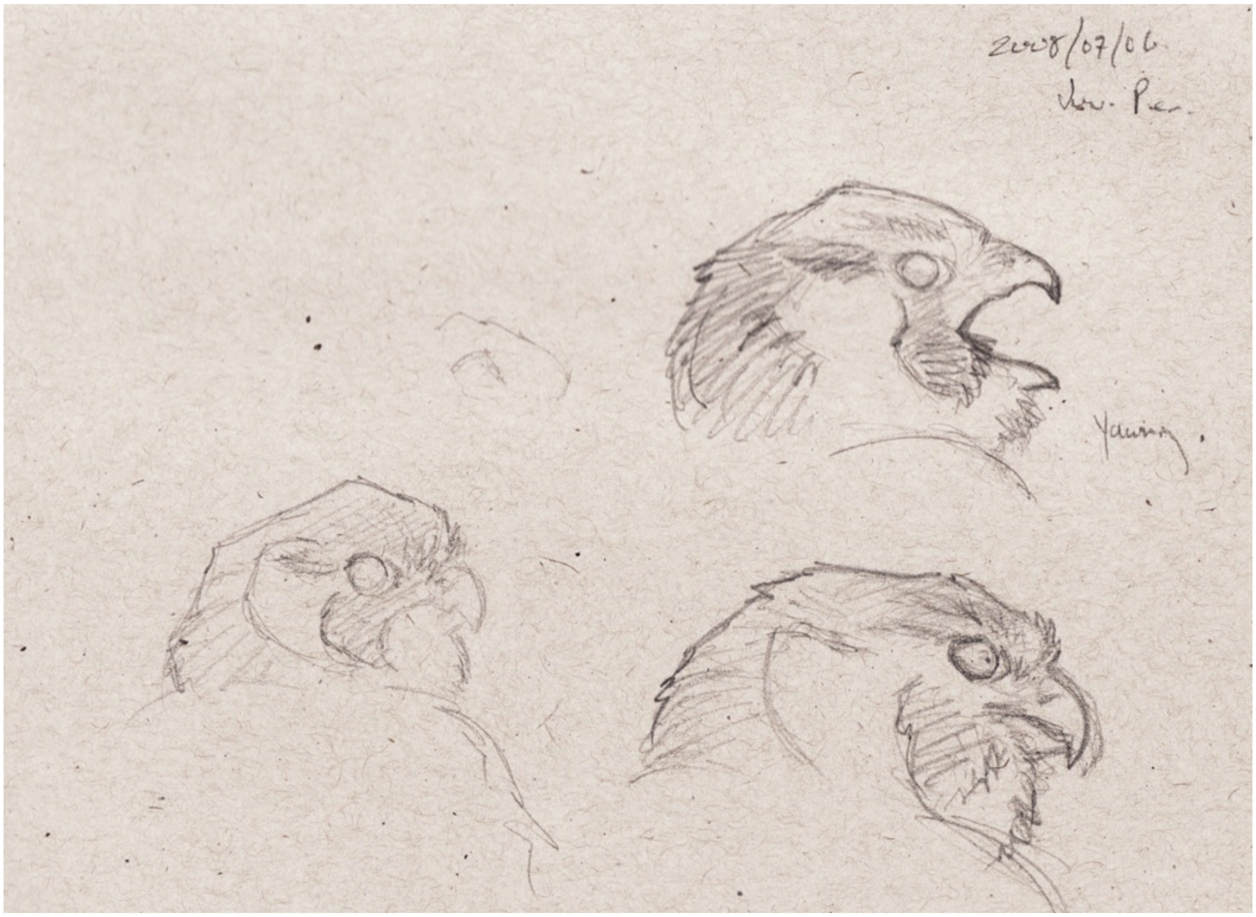
In flight birds of prey show good definition and distinctive profiles (a profile drawing would be a good point at which to start). Even though they are incredibly fast when pursuing prey, some species are easy to watch and sketch even in the wild. Buzzards (hawks in the USA) are locally common birds and their habit of perching on telegraph poles, fence posts and in some cases molehills as they wait for feeding opportunities make them compliant models for the artist. In flight they soar and will also hover from time to time; actions that are beautiful to watch and fruitful to draw.



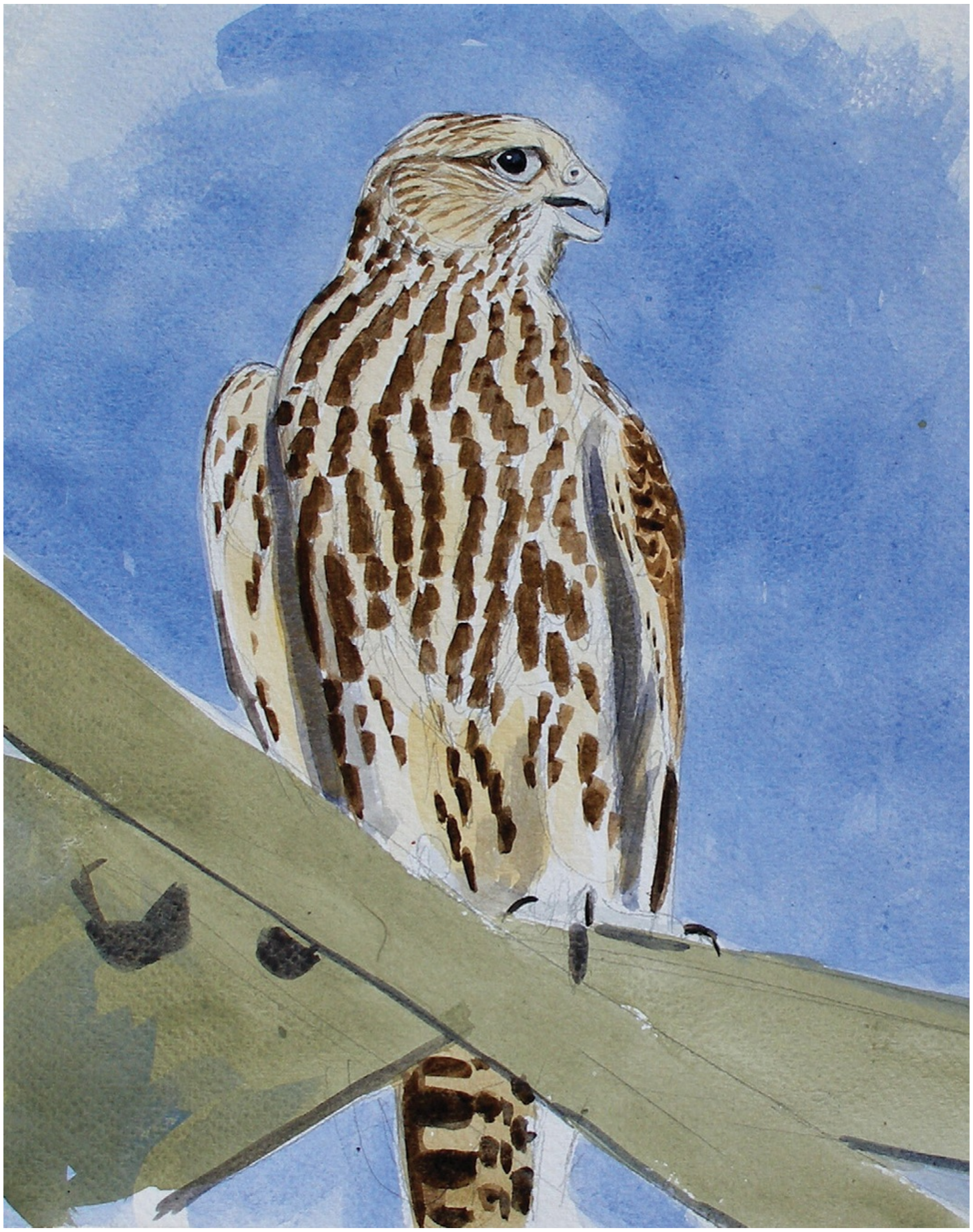


Tim Wootton: skeleton of a sparrowhawk.

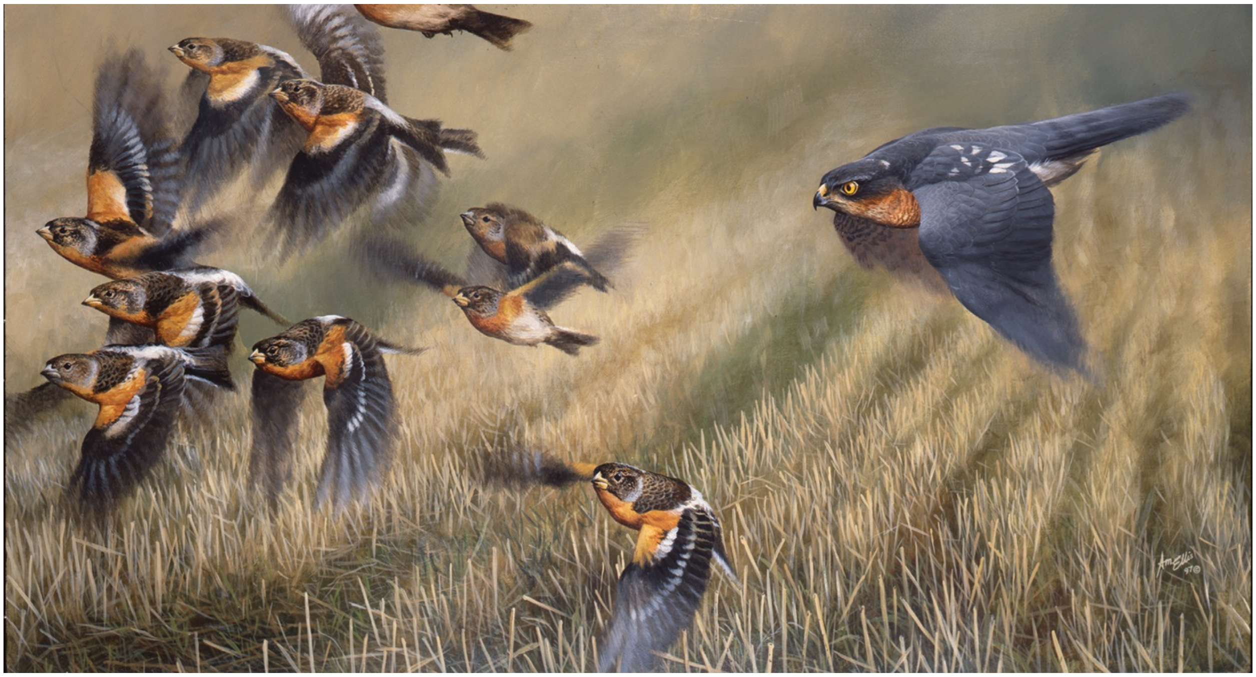
This is just a very small proportion of the subjects available but I wanted to highlight types that are easy to locate and are easily viewed. With experience and confidence you will soon be seeking out your own models in the natural environment. And once you are happy that you are catching the general look of your birds, you may then start to delve a little deeper into their lives and their characteristics.


2008/07/06
Juv. Pe.
Yawning.

Jocelyn Oudesluys: peregrine studies.



Szabolcs Kokay: saker falcon.



**Andrew Ellis: *Confusion Tactics* – sparrowhawk and bramblings.
Acrylic on panel.**

CHAPTER 5

ADDING PAINT

If one says ‘Red’ – the name of the colour – and there are fifty people listening, it can be expected that there will be fifty reds in their minds. And one can be sure that all these reds will be very different.

Josef Albers

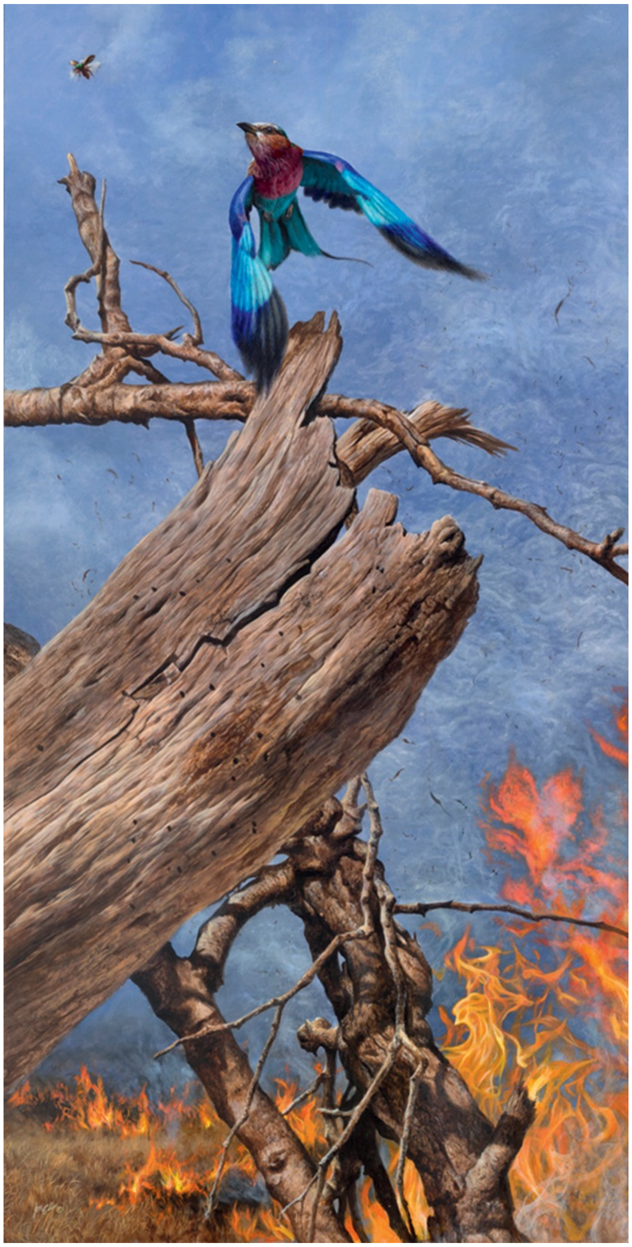
Colour is crucial in painting, but it is very hard to talk about. There is almost nothing you can say that holds up as a generalization, because it depends on too many factors: size, modulation, the rest of the field, a certain consistency that colour has with forms, and the statement you’re trying to make.

Roy Lichtenstein

I want to know one thing. What is colour?

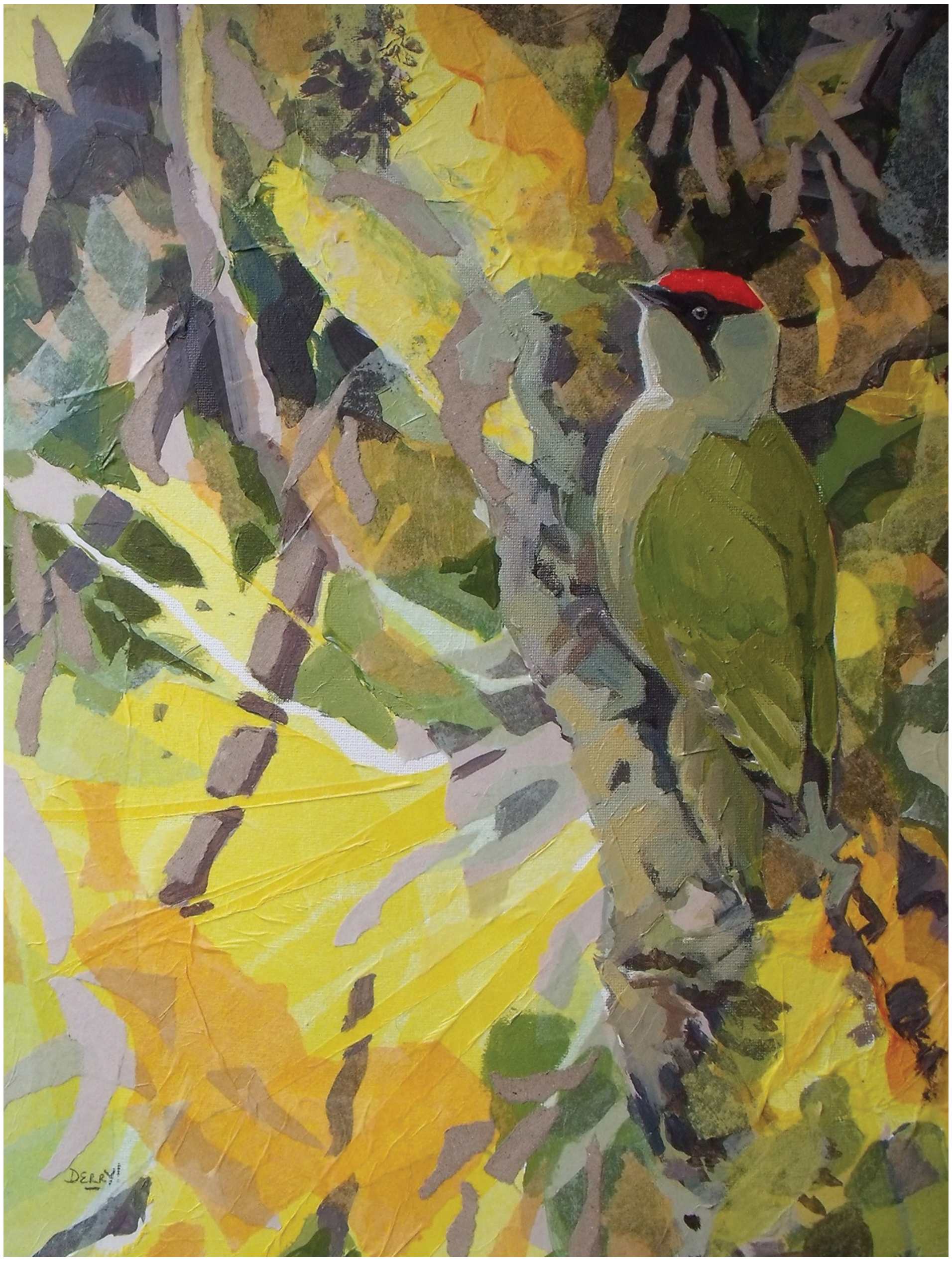
Pablo Picasso

Colour, and its application, is a highly subjective area. The approach will vary from person to person and we all see and interpret colour in our own way. The use of colour is also associated with a personal painting style, and with the artist’s philosophical approach to making images. Certain techniques demand particular consistencies of paint, and environmental conditions will have a bearing on the pigments and suspensions.



Andrew Ellis: *Roller*.

The options are wide indeed and there are many instructive publications for the interested student to research. Firstly, however, you should be aware of the ‘colour wheel’, and what are primary, secondary and complementary colours. A colour wheel has six segments. In three, spaced evenly apart, are the primary colours (red, blue and yellow). Interspaced are the colours that are made when the flanking primaries are mixed. Between red and yellow is orange, between yellow and blue is green and between blue and red is purple. These are the secondary colours. In the six-segment wheel the colours opposite each other are called the complementary colours: red and green, blue and orange, and yellow and purple. When complementary colours are laid beside each other, they can make interesting combinations and each serves to emphasize the qualities of the other. When a complementary colour is applied over its opposite (or mixed with it), the effect is to subdue the vibrancy. There is much theory regarding colour; however, regarding the painting of birds it may be informative to follow a process through as in a real-life situation.



Nick Derry: green woodpecker. Watercolour, acrylics and collage.

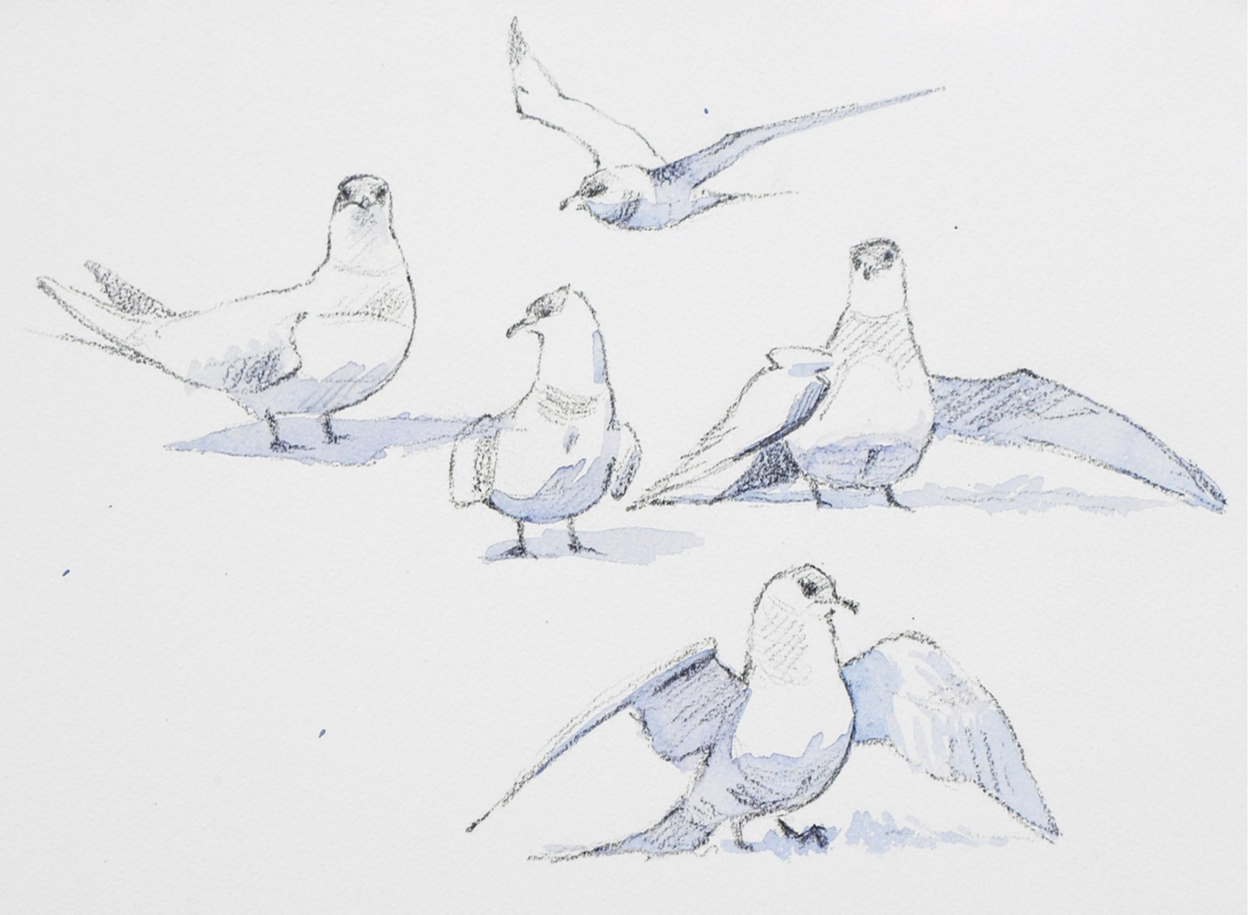
Texture is closely allied to colour and notes on surface quality and feel will add to the richness of recollection when you come to revisit the original drawings.

ADDING COLOUR IN THE FIELD

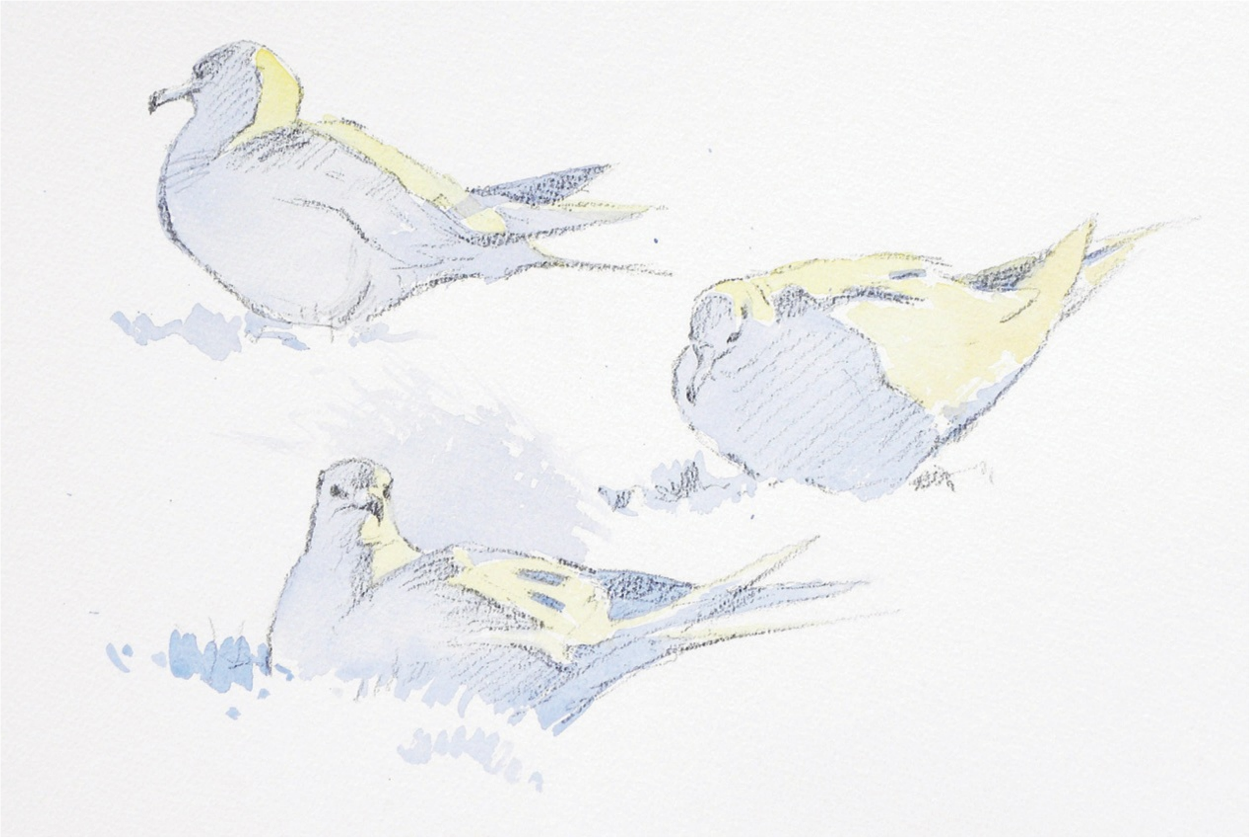
The addition of colour to your drawings is a brave stride forward.

When drawing outside, written notes about local colour can help to break down the psychological barrier of actually painting in the field. The making of a list and a written description helps you to analyse what colours you are in fact seeing and additional observations such as ‘grades from pale purple to dark blue’ and a directional arrow can be interpreted when you come to address the collected sketches back in the studio. Try to use your own descriptions for how a scene looks – reference to food or emotions when describing colour can be very useful when you come to the process of painting. Before long, however, you’ll get the paints out and place a bit of colour on the paper.

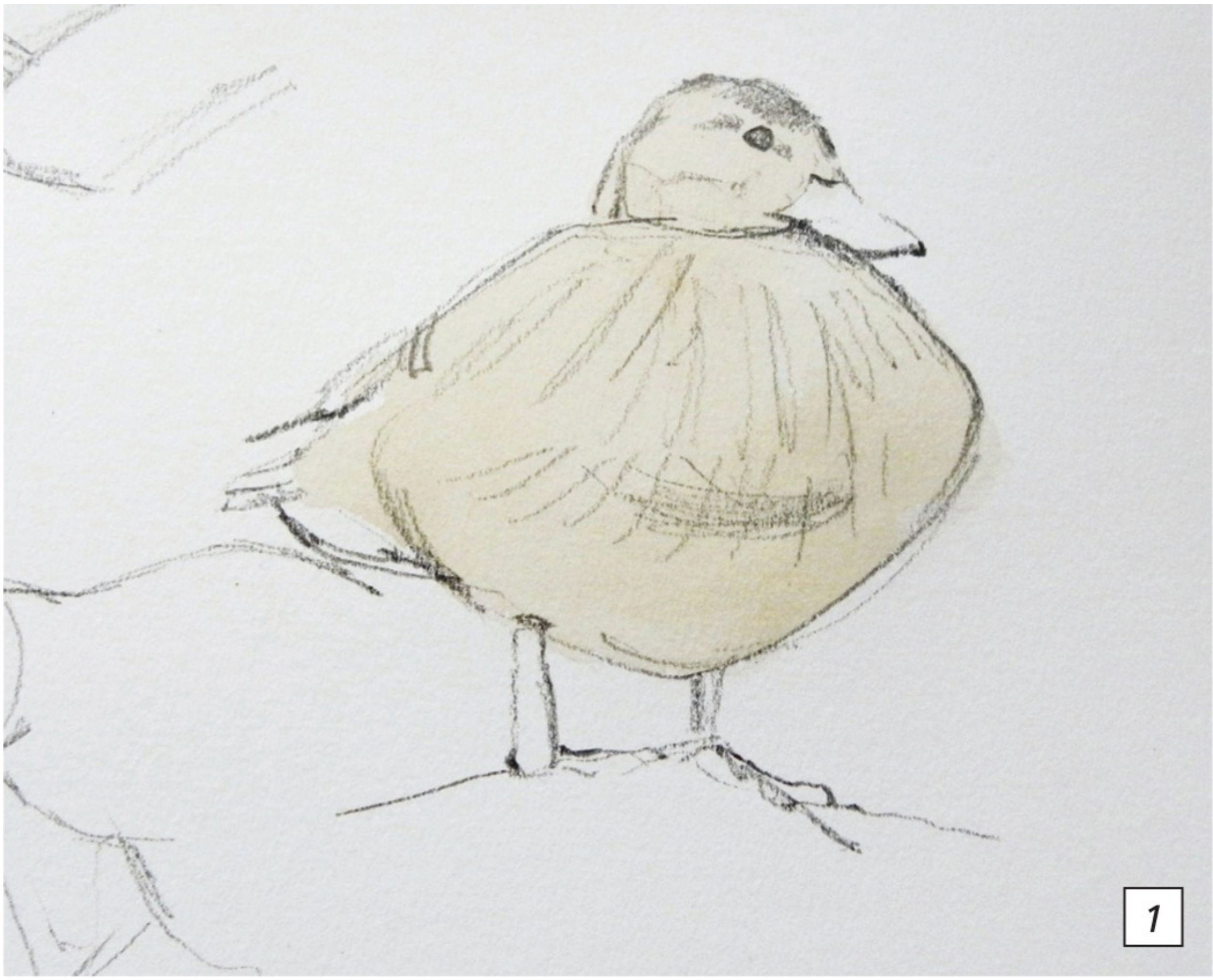
In the first instance it should be kept as simple as possible, perhaps exchanging the grey values of the pencil marks for blue hues of shadow.



Take a sketch and lay a light shade of blue along the underside (use coloured pencils or a wash of watercolour) and see how the volume of the drawing is accentuated.



Highlighted areas in drawings can accept a pale yellow wash of colour to emphasize the strength of light bathing the image.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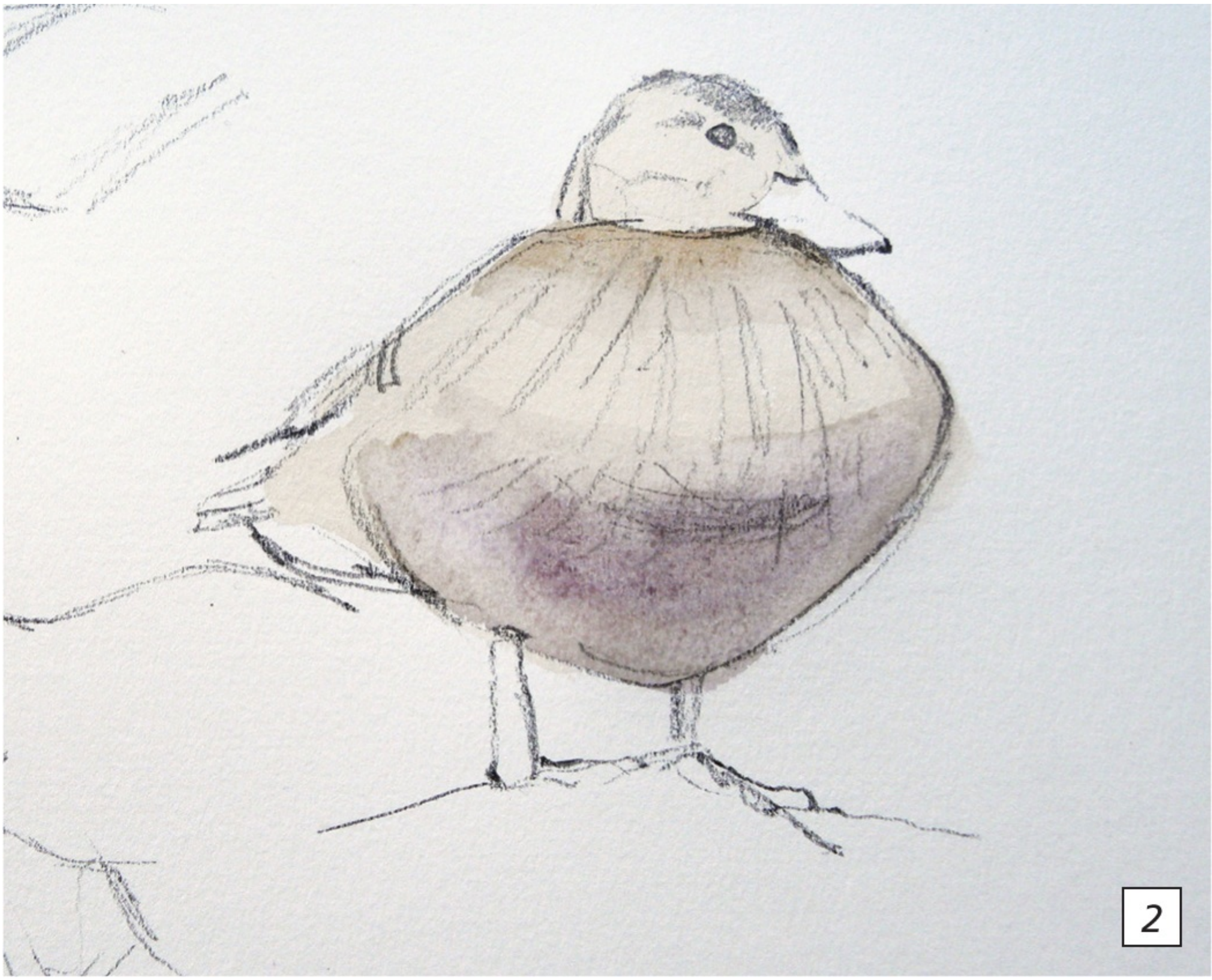

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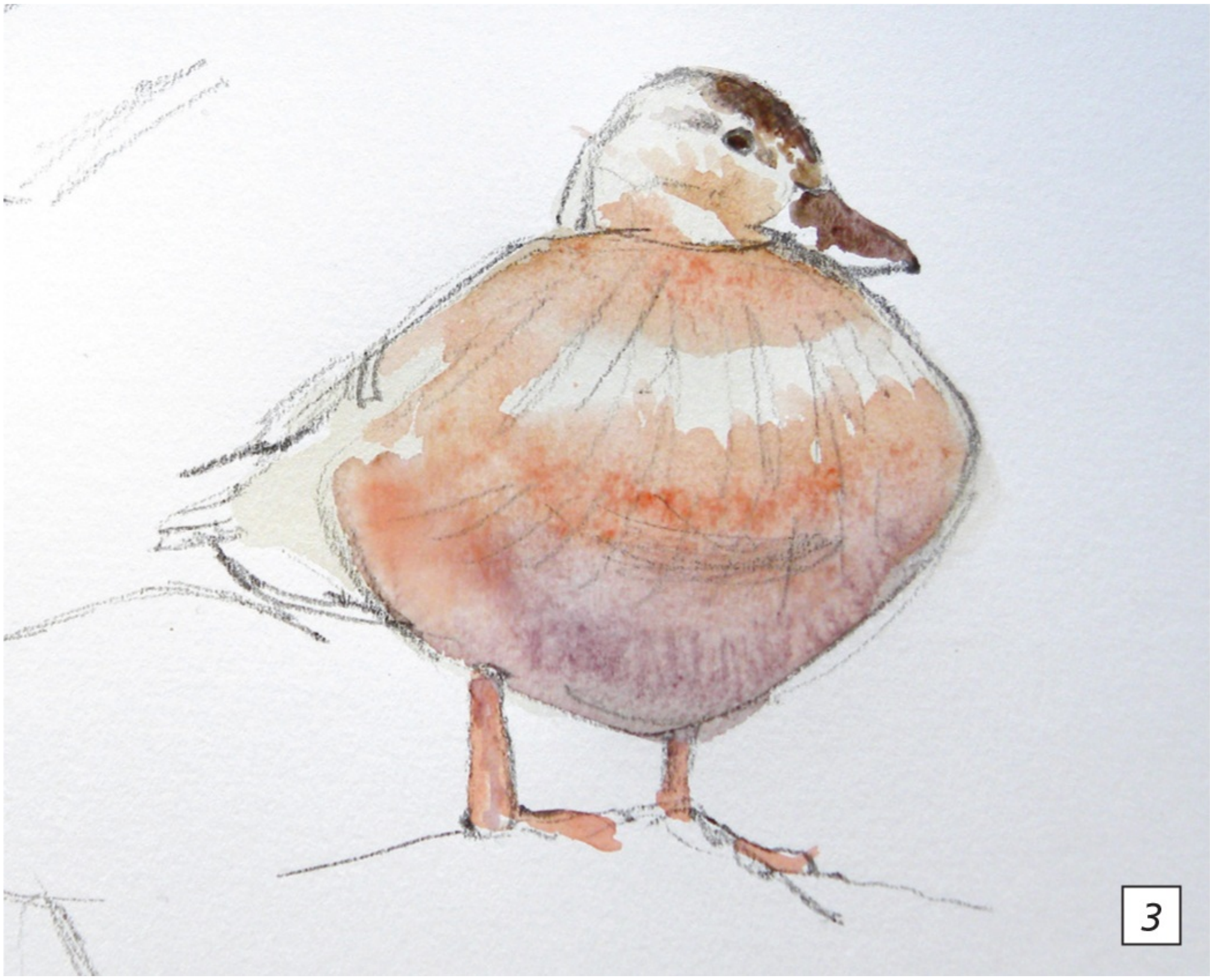
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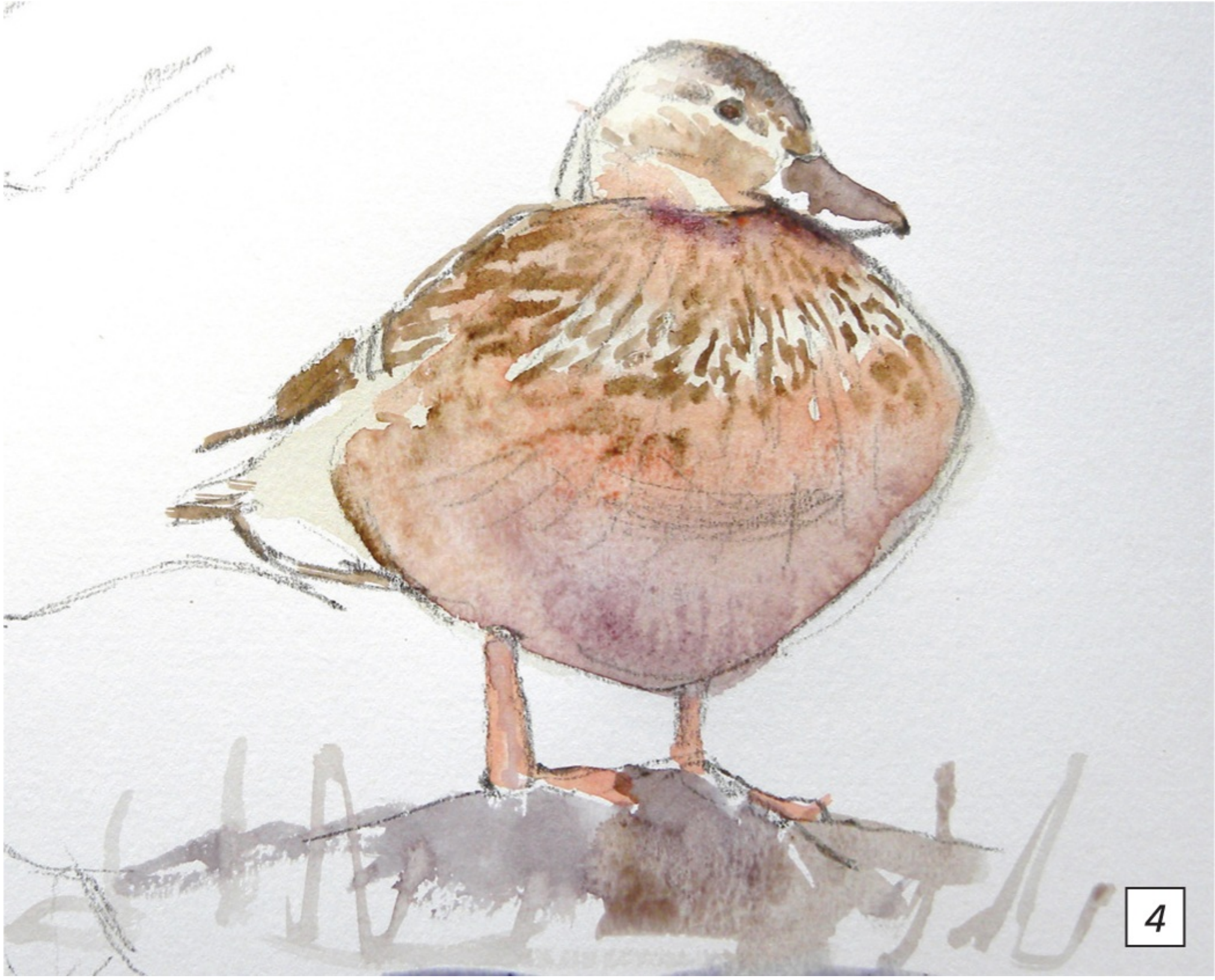
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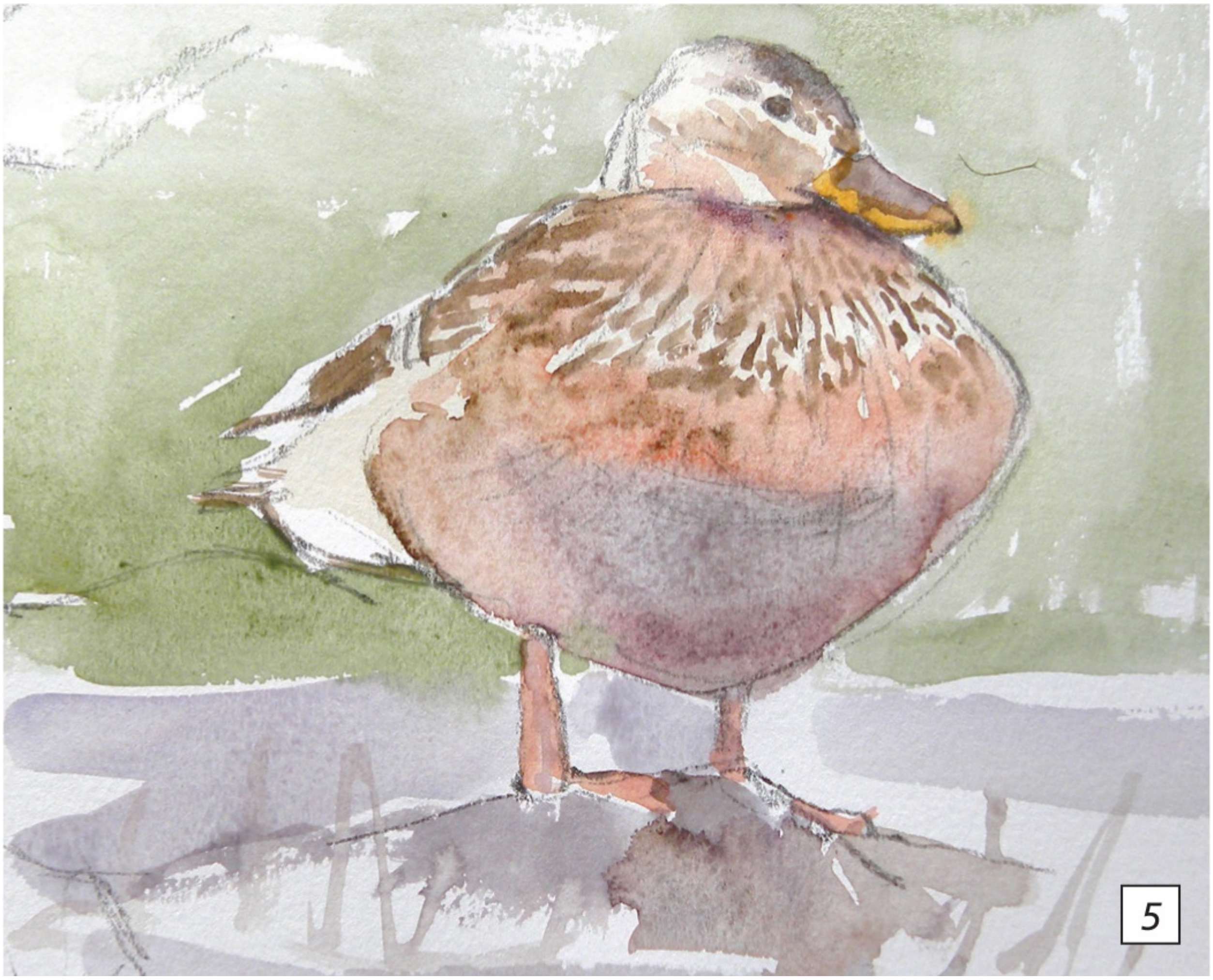
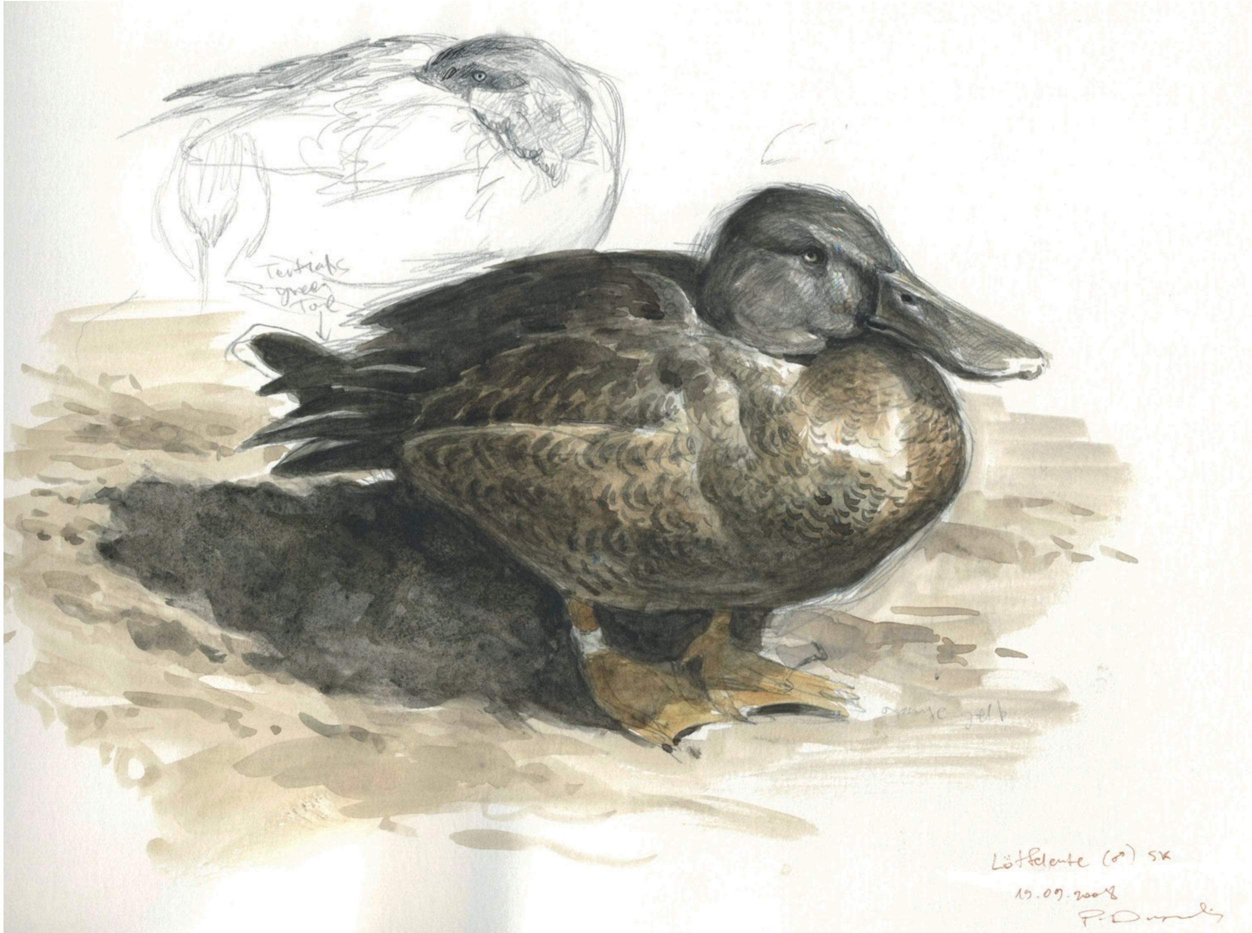


Tim Wootton: mallard duck. Early afternoon is a good time to draw birds if you're after amenable subjects, as many birds will be thinking about having a mid-day rest, preen and stretch and maybe have a doze. This female mallard had just gone through such a routine and was now standing on a mid-water rock. I made a quick outline sketch in preparation for paint. Stage 1: paint an overall brown wash (raw umber); Stage 2: lay a darkish hue (purple) under the bird's belly and on the top of its breast, leaving an area in the middle which is reflecting a lot of light; Stage 3: paint a warmer brown (burnt sienna) still leaving the light area; Stage 4: add a few markings in raw umber mixed with a touch of blue; Stage 5: darken the shadow, add colour to the bill and sketch a general tone behind the bird to give it background.


Tertials
green
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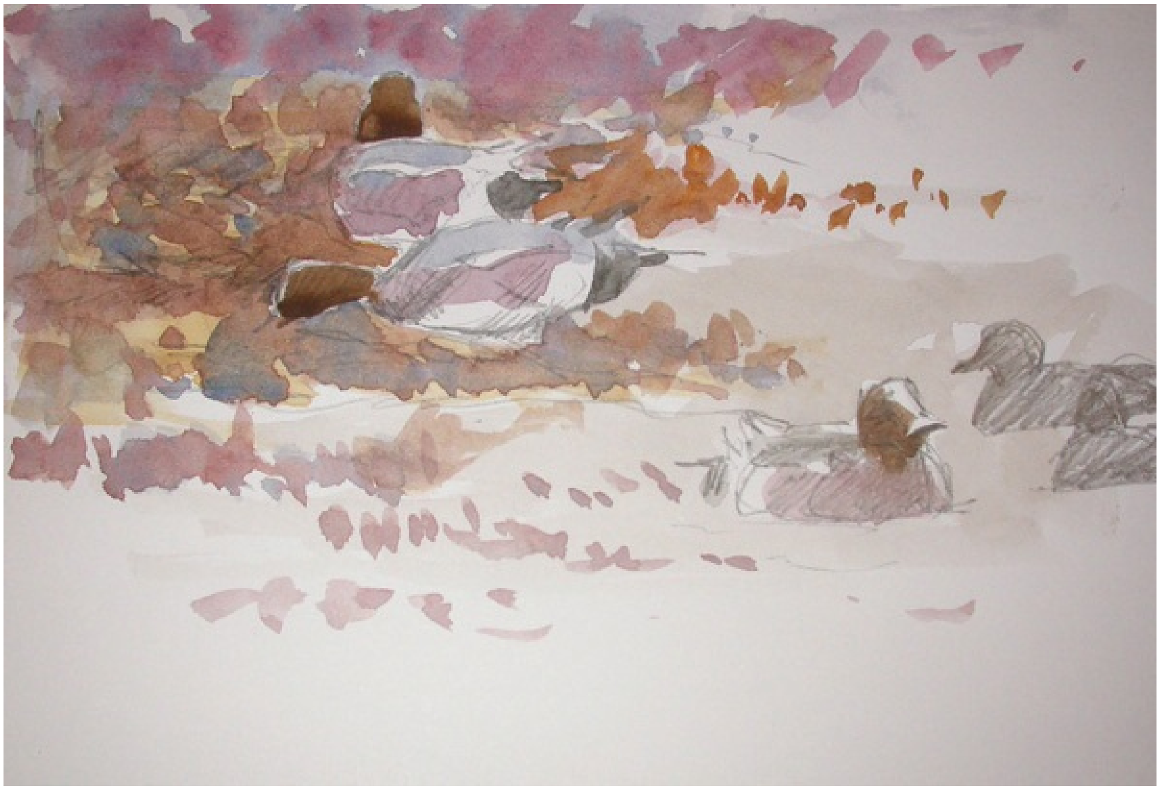
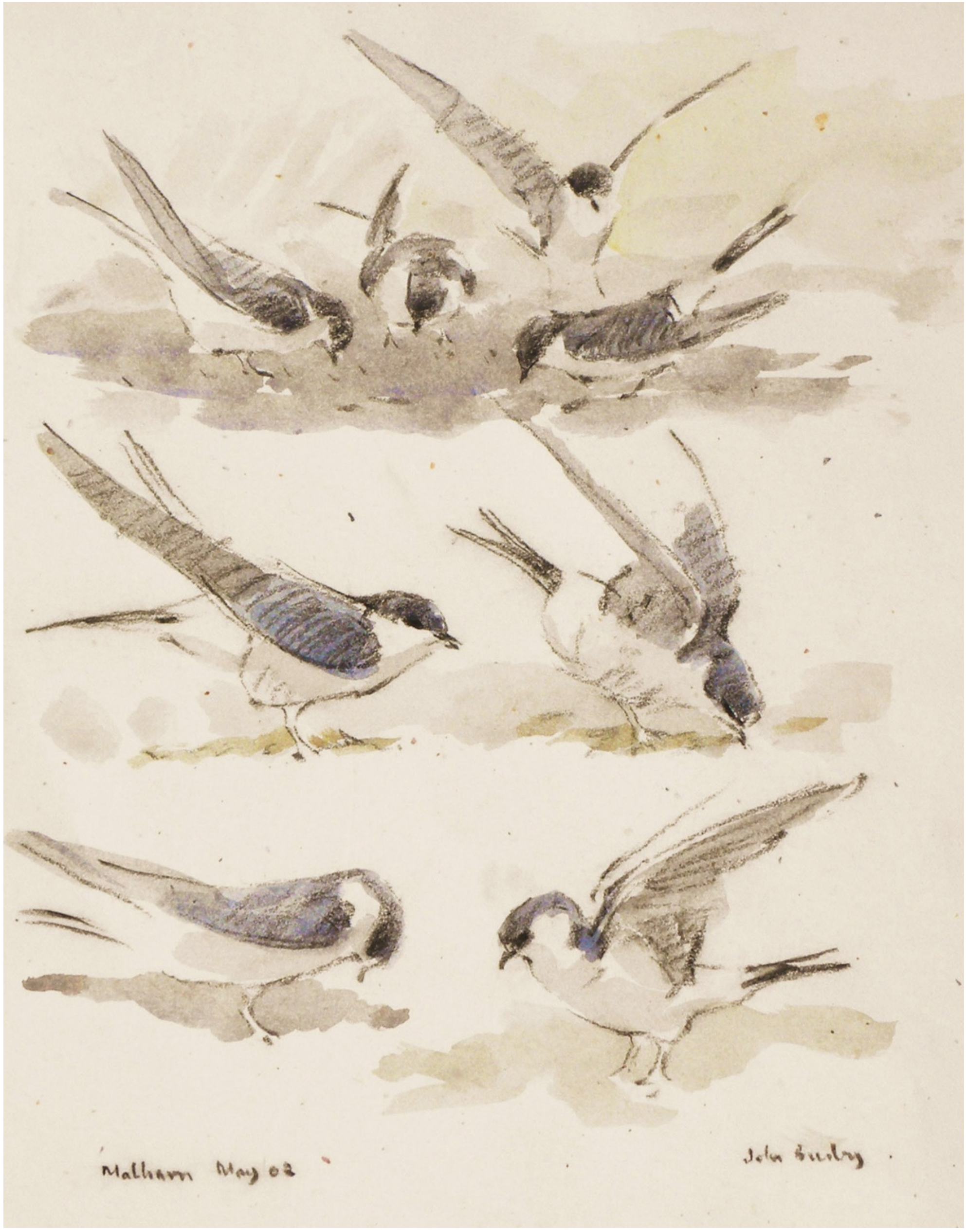
Paschalis Dougalis: male shoveler in eclipse plumage. Lights and darks and a subtle use of browns over a very precise pencil study made from a tame bird.

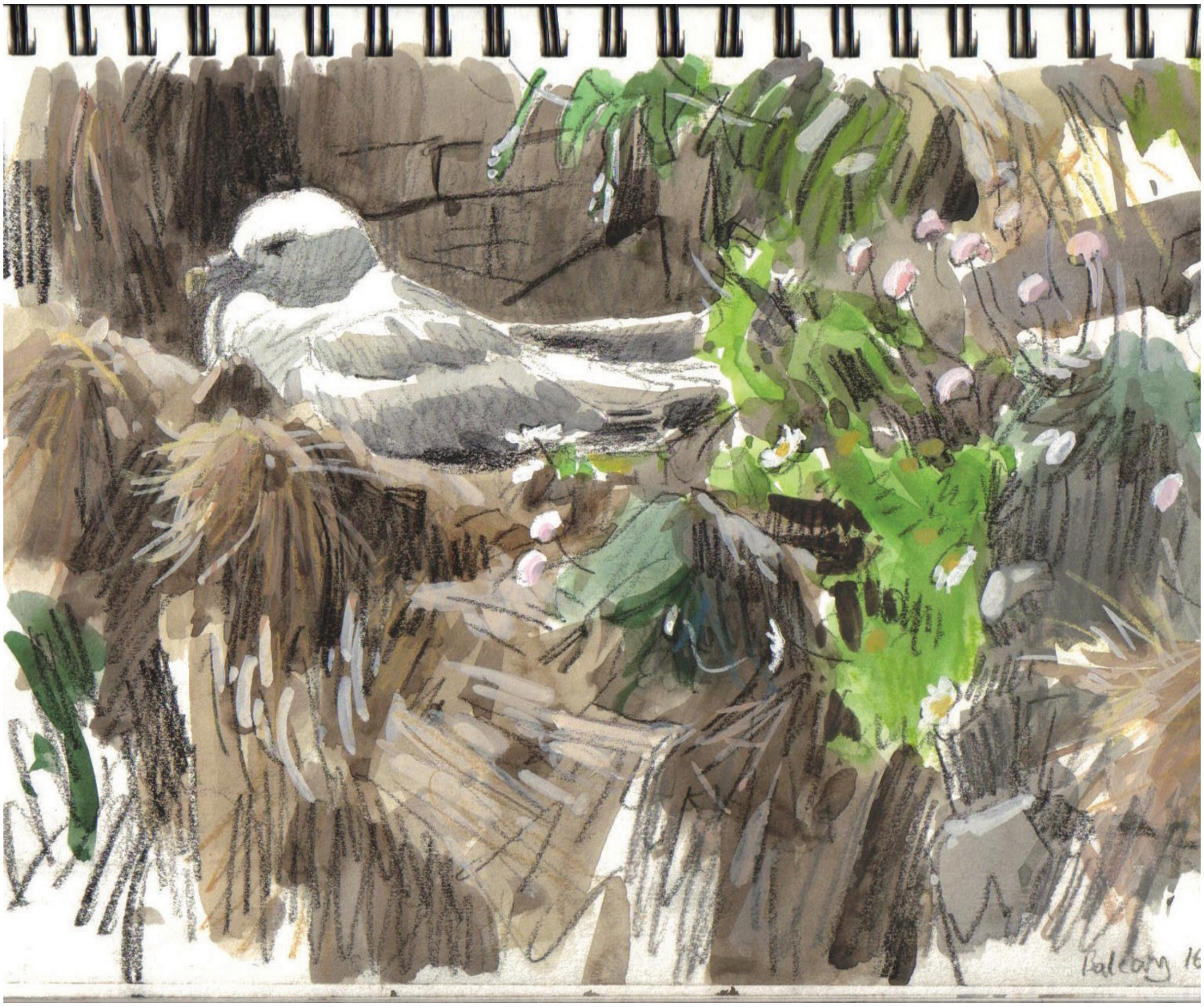


Tim Wootton: wigeon group. Blobs of colour quickly applied over thumbnail sketches – an account of the scene.

Taking it a step further: on page 95 is a demonstration of how I quickly place a touch of colour on a drawing whilst looking at the subject. This piece was drawn from a distant bird through a telescope from the relative comfort of a bird hide – an excellent place to paint as it has a shelf for sketchbooks, paints and water (although some may feel reluctant to draw in front of other people). A car can always double as a hide but is a little more cramped and the angle of view can give you a crick in the neck. The boot of an estate car can be surprisingly comfortable if you can manoeuvre it so the back is pointing towards the subject and set the scope up on the ground; all your drawing materials can be in easy reach and you and your artwork will receive some protection from the weather.

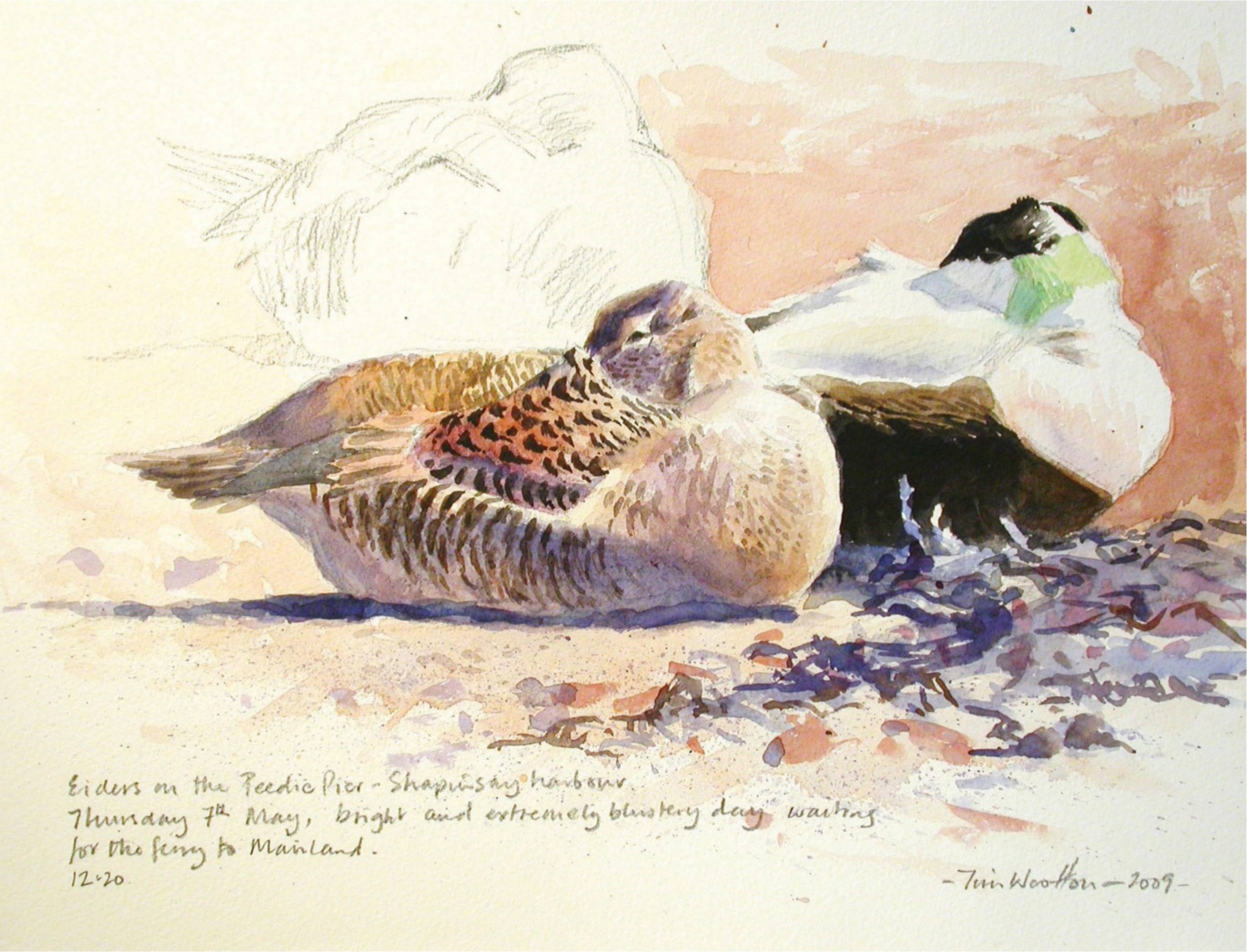

Malham May 02
John Busby

John Busby: house martins collecting mud. These are drawn as he sees them with a smear of blue and grey to lift the birds’ upper parts and a diluted hue suggesting shadow under the elevated wings.

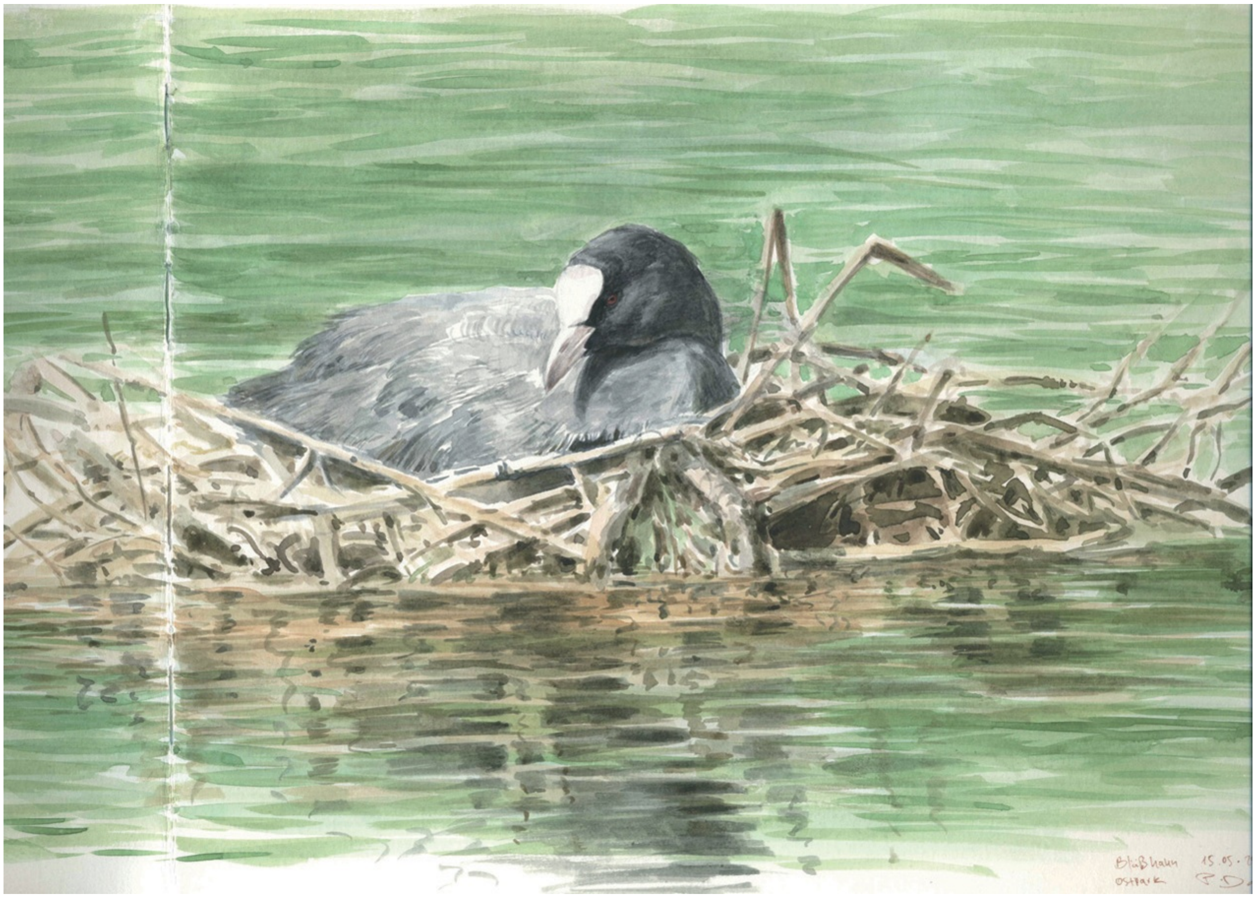


John Threlfall: incubating fulmar. Field painting; the colours in shade are quite muted and washed with greyish blue, as are the shadow areas of the bird.

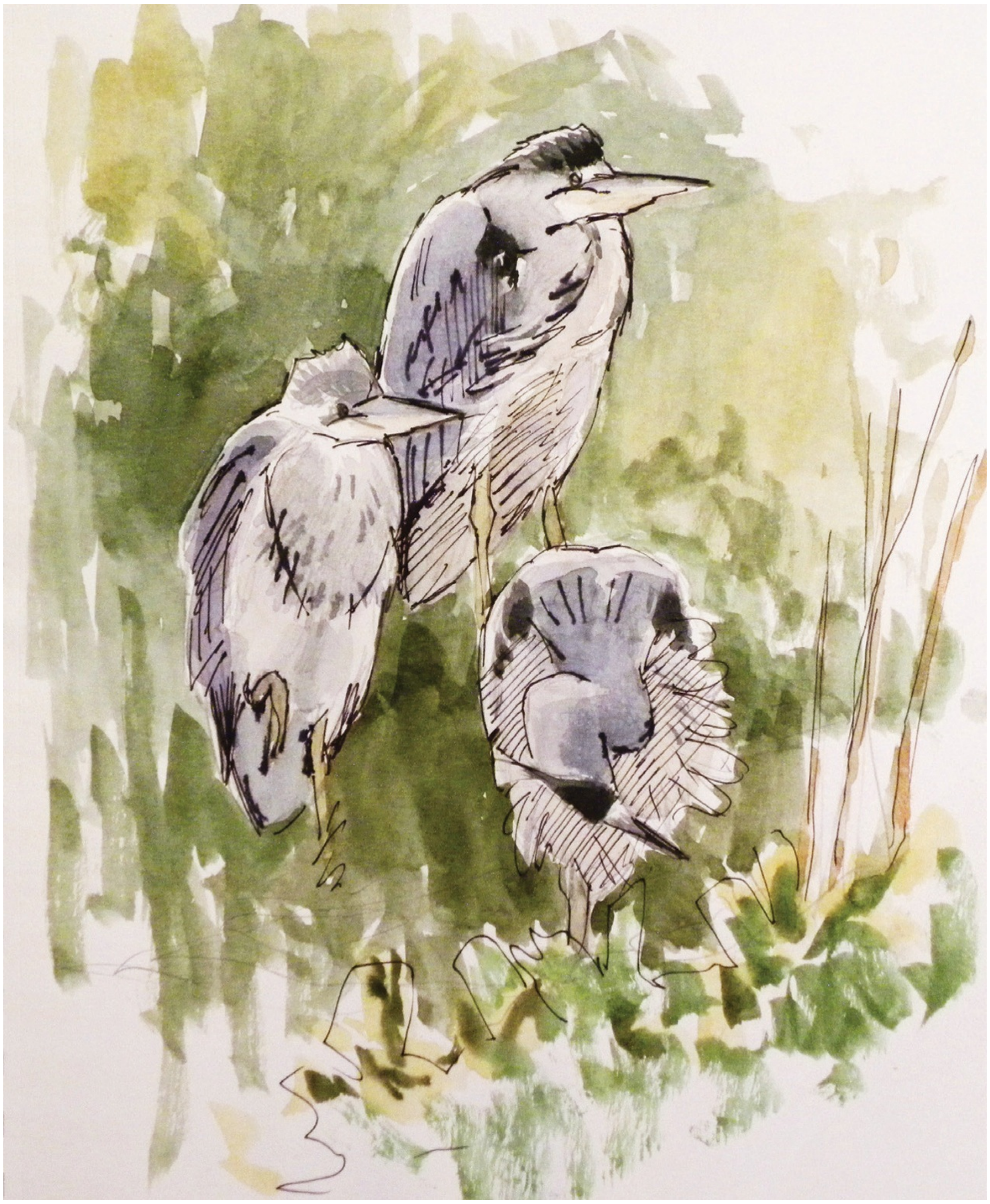
If there is strong light there will be strong shadow, or at least it will be apparent which areas are in the shade. A quick and effective way to describe this is to try and see the point at which the light stops hitting the bird and draw the boundary with a line. A wash of blue into this zone will quickly depict the shadow areas. There will also be subtle areas of shadow within the highlighted areas and areas of relative illumination within the shade.


Eiders on the Peedie Pier - Shapinsay harbour
Thursday 7th May, bright and extremely blustery day waiting
for the ferry to Mainland.
12.20
- Tim Wootton - 2009 -

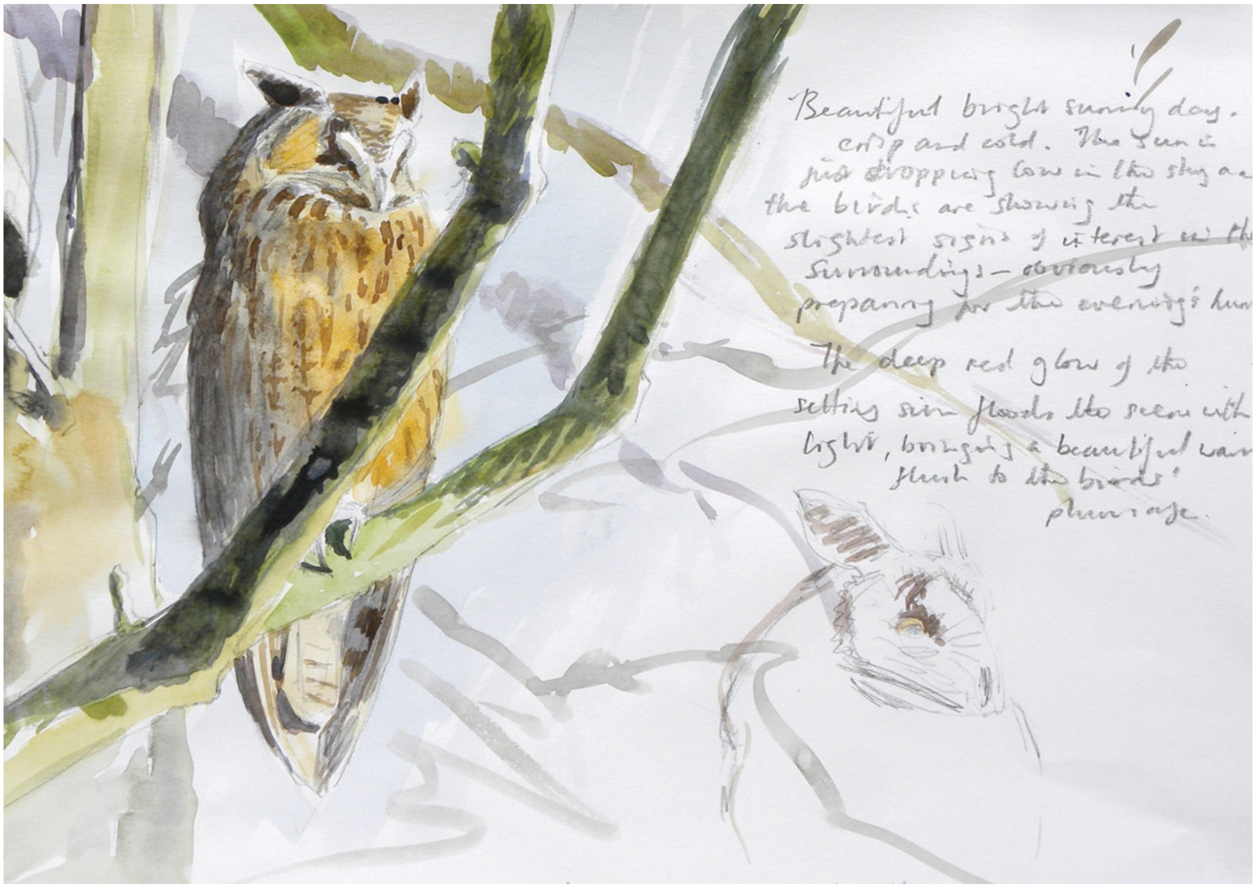
Tim Wootton: eiders on the Peedie Pier. Field painting. These two colour sketches are of birds in strong direct light, influenced by reflected light from their immediate surroundings. Selecting compliant models such as incubating seabirds or loafing wildfowl gives the artist the opportunity to consider colour as well as the form of the subject and its environs. The aspect of the immediate landscape is important because only when the bird is put into its surroundings can it be understood in context.



Paschalis Dougalis: incubating coot. The artist has seized an ideal opportunity to explore the subtleties of hue, value and texture in the bird’s plumage. The floating nest of branches and dead vegetation is rendered as thoughtfully as the bird, giving the sketch a very wholesome flavour.



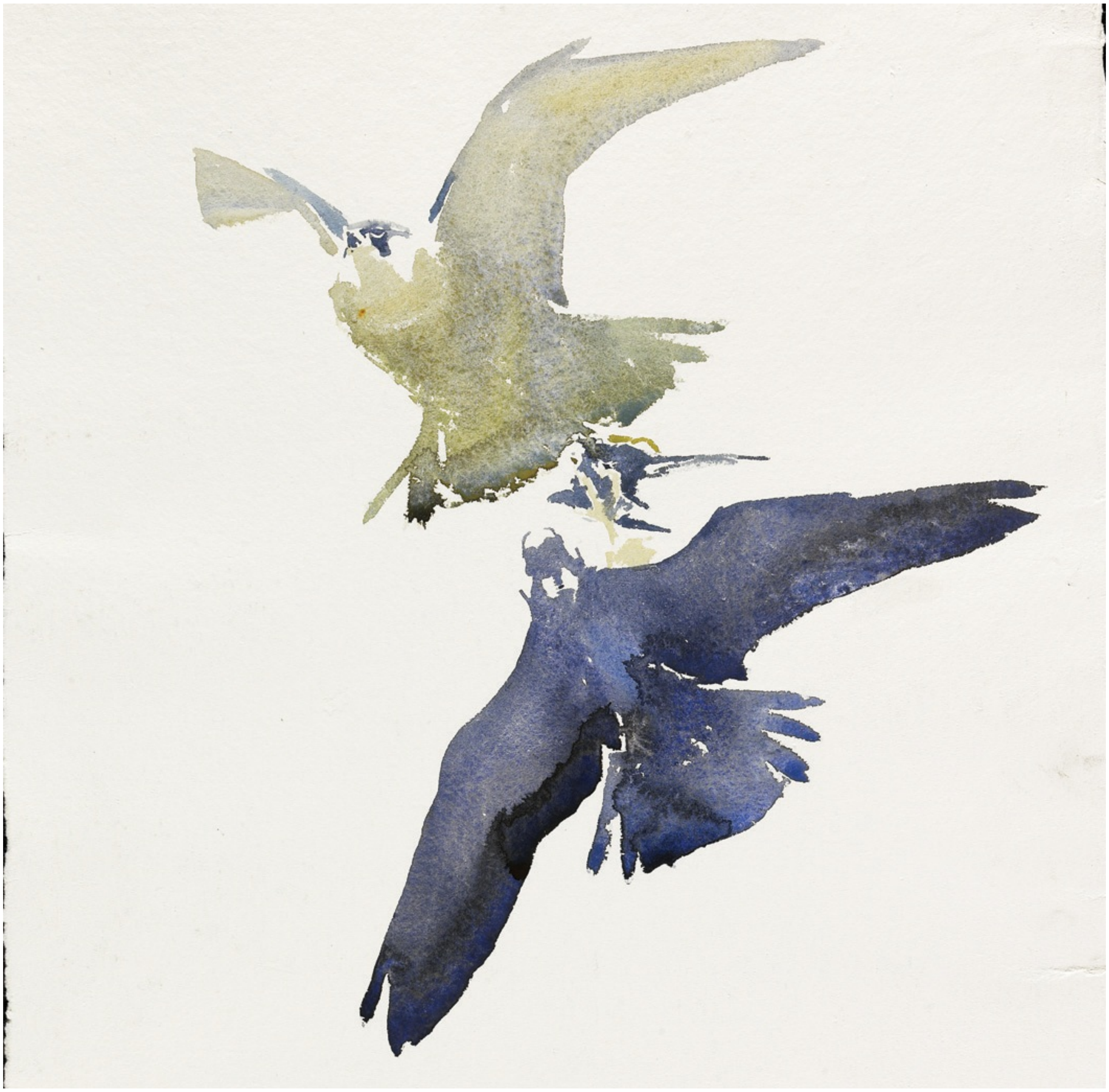
Tim Wootton: grey herons. Felt tip and watercolour drawn from the car using a telescope.



Beautiful bright sunny day.
crisp and cold. The sun is
just dropping low in the sky a
the birds are showing the
slightest signs of interest in th
surroundings – obviously
preparing for the evening's hun

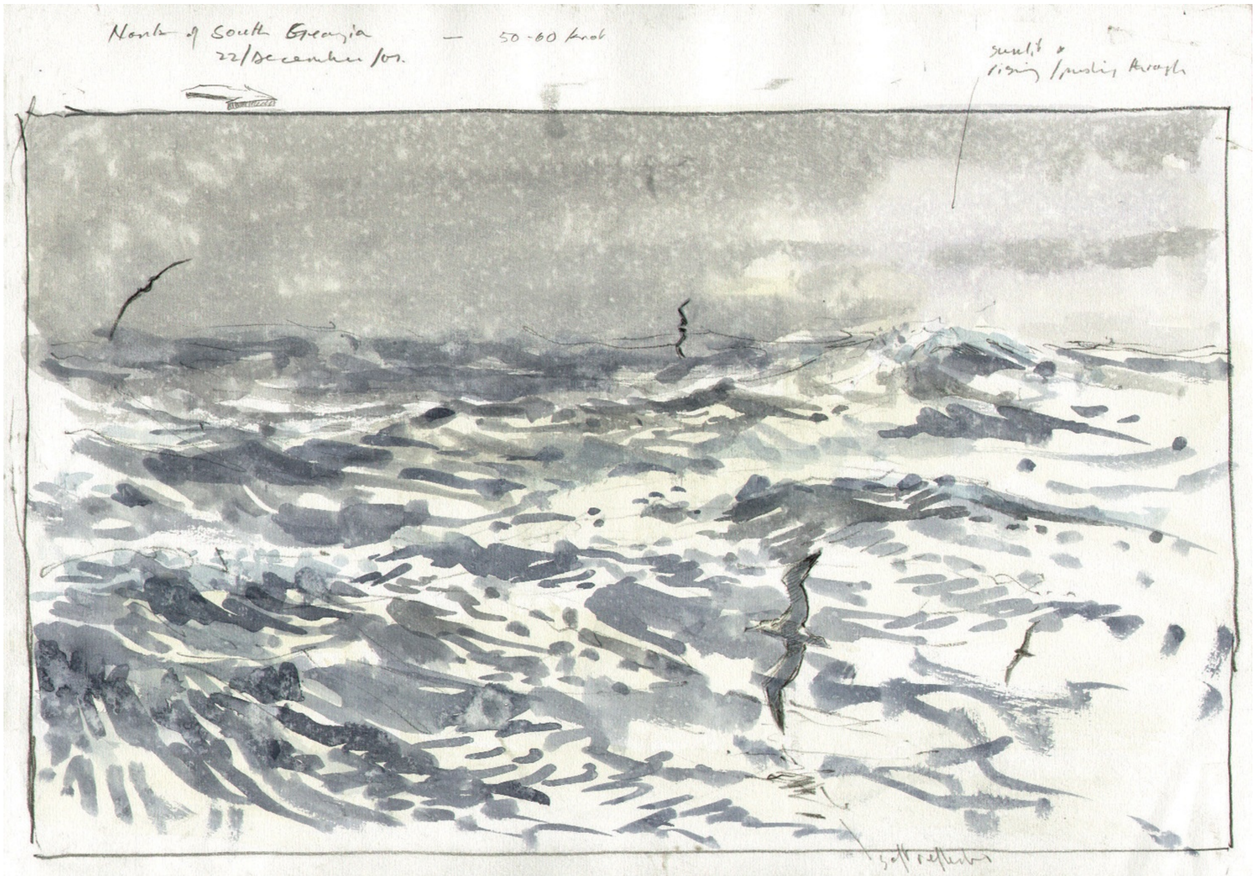
The deep red glow of the
setting sun floods the scene with
light, bringing a beautiful war
flush to the birds'
plumage.

Tim Wootton: study of a long-eared owl. This is a drawing of one of two birds that had been using a stand of gnarled sycamore trees as a winter daytime roost for a number of weeks. It was apparent that they were very settled and unlikely to flee the scene so I took a little more time drawing detail than is usual for me in the field. The low winter sun bathed the scene in golden light, accentuating the warm hues in the bird's plumage. The addition of the sketch of the tree is essential to place the bird in context as is the play of light and shade. There are three colours used in the sketch (in addition to the graphite drawing): burnt sienna, sap green and violet, mixed in different proportions and applied wet in places and more intensely within the darker areas. The study was painted whilst watching the bird through a telescope.



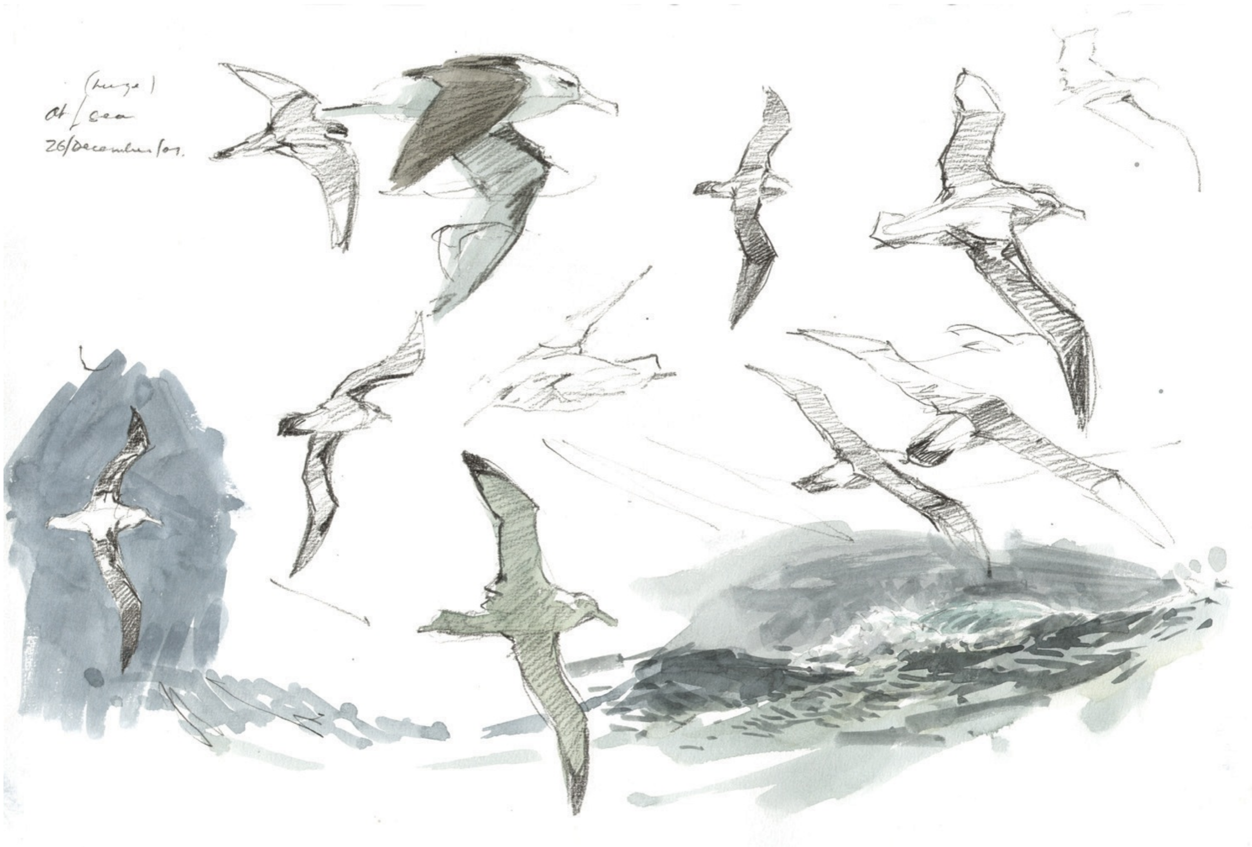
Darren Woodhead: peregrine food pass (watercolour). Using a very minimal palette of burnt sienna and Prussian blue the artist recreates this fascinating piece of behaviour in a very pure watercolour technique.

Colour in nature is always changing depending on the intensity and amount of light and the direction from which the light is coming. A hawthorn tree in a grassy field will look similar in colour and density to the grass if the sun is behind you, but walk around the other side of the tree and, being in shade, it now looks almost black, whereas the light will be reflecting off the grass and lightening the value and the hue. So actually seeing colour in nature is almost an intuitive thing and deciding what colour relates to the tubes in your kit can be very difficult to work out. One approach is to try and evaluate the relative temperatures of the colours you’re seeing: a blue-green is a cool green; a green with hints of burnt sienna is a warm green; but often it’s not easy to make these judgements until you’ve physically placed some colour on the paper. Likewise when painting a bird there will be the overall plumage colour, the effect of light on the upper parts, and often the undersides and shaded areas will be picking up reflected hues from the local environment.



Bruce Pearson: field painting of albatrosses in the Southern Ocean (graphite and watercolour). Painted from the deck of a ship, the suggestion of light glaring from the surface of the sea is created by leaving much white paper showing through fairly transparent colours. The white underside of the lower bird is cast in shadow and set against the brightness of the reflected light; hence the artist

places the bird relatively darker than its locale. The brooding sky is deckled with rain spots.



Bruce Pearson: flight studies of albatrosses. Graphite and watercolour wash. Investigative studies of form and light.

Which colours to take?

Be prepared! You never know when a wonderful opportunity to draw and paint may occur. Always have to hand a basic kit, which you can pop in a pocket or a handbag, glove box in the car or wherever. And for working in the field the kit could consist of a small watercolour field-box and a pencil case containing your preferred sketching pencils, a couple of watercolour brushes (with bristle protectors on), a pencil sharpener, biro and felt-tip pen. A small screw-top jar (the ones that have individual portions of jam or marmalade) containing water is very handy, as is a small selection of coloured pencils, which could feasibly be carried in your pencil case. A small tube of white gouache could also come in handy for obliterating errors in drawing (note: no rubber) and for mixing with watercolour to make a ‘body colour’ useful for stronger statements in colour or value.

Watercolour is the principal medium for field-sketching birds. Watercolour comes in tubes and as moist blocks called pans or, more often, half-pans. If you prefer tubes you will also need a palette (usually plastic or porcelain), whereas if you use half-pans they are available in compact boxes with integrated palettes. Both tubes and pans are used with the addition of water; colours are mixed on the palette. The colour is applied using conventional watercolour brushes or recently developed ‘reservoir’ brushes. The handles of these are tubes containing water – when they are squeezed, water irrigates through the bristles, thus negating the requirement of a separate water container.

Watercolour is a versatile medium but when used in direct sunshine it can dry exceptionally quickly. Conversely I have from time to time been working in the field when the water has frozen in the palette and on the bristles.

Watercolour pencils are worth trying. They are a convenient way to add tints; by drawing on paper interesting granular lines can be made and if water is added you can mix and wash colours on the paper. Heavier weight paper is recommended for this medium. Combining watercolour pencils and pure watercolour can give rise to some very interesting effects. Ordinary coloured pencils are appealing if you aren’t used to working in colour in the field – sketching with colour pencils has a natural feel to it and is a recommended process as an introduction to outdoor colour.

The serious *plein-air* painter will probably consider a pochade box – a portable kit containing drawers and compartments with paints, brushes, pastels, a mobile studio almost. Some have extendable arms that perform as an easel.

Oils and acrylics can be used outside. Acrylic paint is a fastdrying medium which is diluted with water for wash effects and used straight from the tube when painting more impasto pieces. Acrylics can also dry too quickly in warm weather and a spray bottle with water is worth taking with you. Spray the canvas or board regularly to keep your applied paints workable for longer. Retarding agents are also available; these extend drying times.

Oil paints are another traditional medium for outside painting, mainly by landscape painters, but they can be used for any style. White spirits are required to clean brushes and also to dilute the paints. They are less affected by climactic conditions than the water-based media. Recently developed are ‘interactive paints’. These are water-based oil paints; that is, they can be diluted and cleaned in water, but have many of the desirable properties of traditional oils. These could possibly be more practical for the outdoor painter.

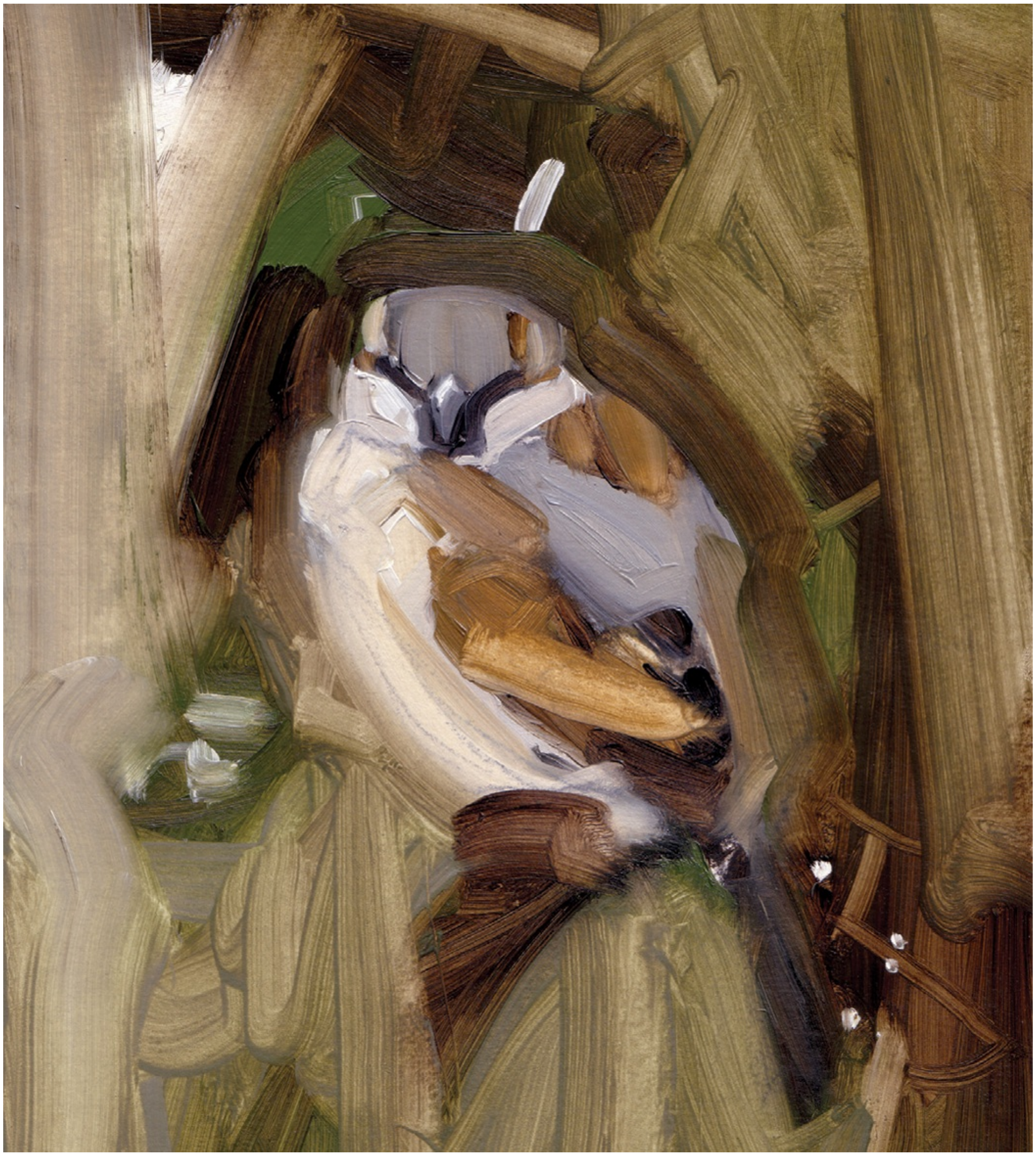
Felt-tip pens are instant to use but may be a little crude for many situations in the field. Try using non-waterproof ones and add water for unusual wash effects. Pastels, soft and oil, are also instant and offer different possibilities for the artist. Try various combinations for grasses, water, rocks, and so on.

Painting blocks are an excellent idea. These are sheets of watercolour paper, lightly glued along the edges to form a block, which has inherent rigidity and is comfortable to work on. Once the painting is completed, the top sheet is removed, leaving a fresh surface to work on. Sheets of thin canvas and canvas-textured paper are available in pads too; a good solution for the outdoor painter who wishes to use thicker media.

In theory you could take as many materials as you were able to carry, but this would probably only confuse you; keeping it simple is sound advice. I tend to use only four or five colours in the field: burnt sienna and cobalt (or ultramarine) offer warm and cool hues in various proportions; violet is handy for lively shadow areas; sap green is nearly always combined with burnt sienna or yellow ochre for vegetation, occasionally with blue in certain circumstances. Yellow ochre can imply areas of sunlight and a tube of titanium white gouache is well worth taking along as it combines well with watercolour, creating opaque effects, and can be used as a glaze to suggest soft overhead light on a bird’s back, or to convey wet surfaces.

ADDING COLOUR IN THE STUDIO

Working in the studio is a very different process from working in the field. But that’s not to say that it is in any way a less exhilarating or indeed frustrating way of working. In fact, having more time to contemplate the methods and procedure can inhibit the way you make marks, apply paint, *etc.* Some methods of working would obviously not transfer from the studio into the field: spray guns which require air compressors, flimsy masking film, collage on windswept moorlands, etching presses, woodcut blocks and large-scale canvas pieces could all be tricky to use in the field. The studio is the place to experiment with processes and techniques. That’s not to say that your field kit and the way you use it isn’t just as valid in the studio. But the studio is more than a place sheltered from the wind. It’s where you can develop ideas, test equipment, have the music on to alter the mood and have a welcome tea break when required.

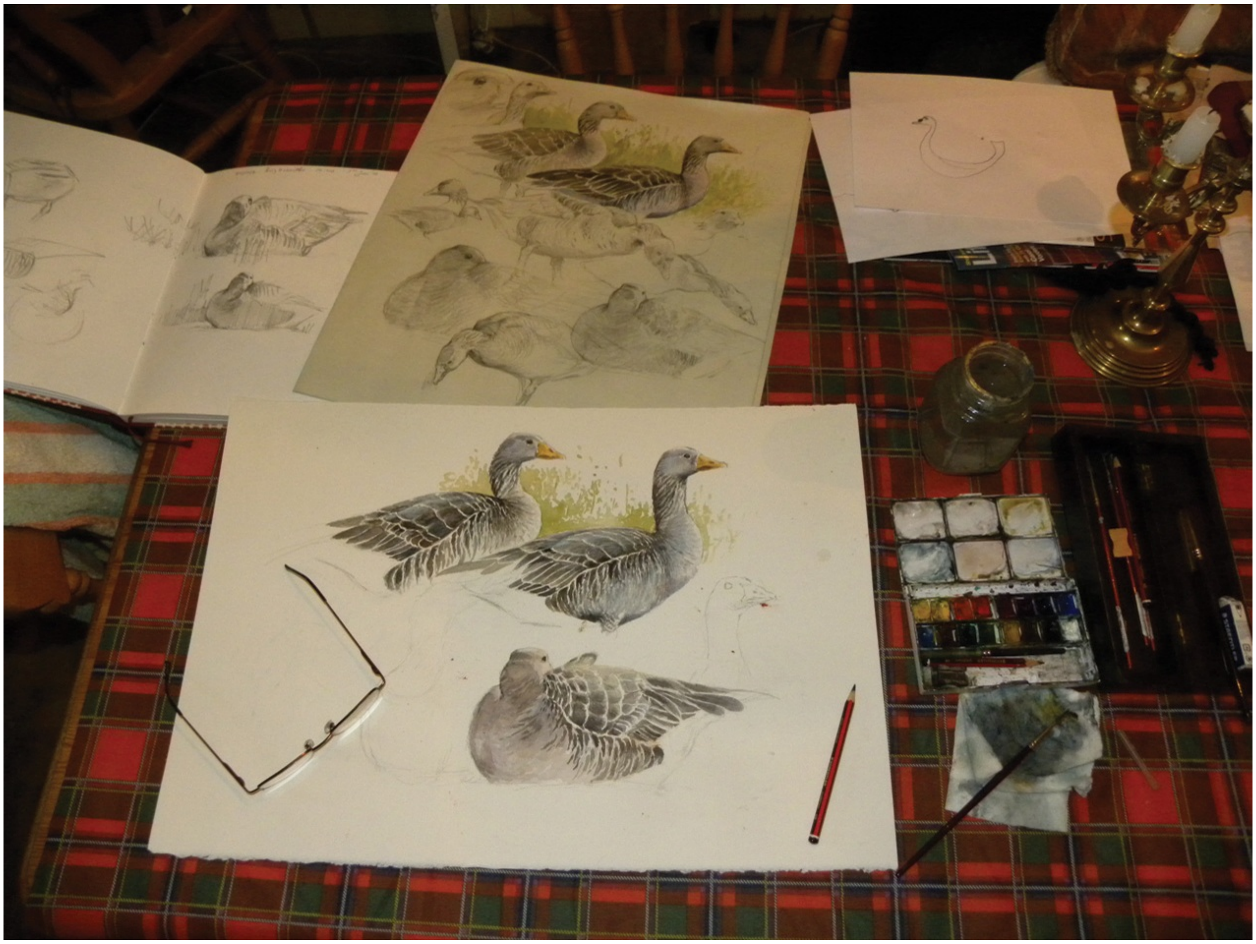


Esther Tyson: study of a cock house sparrow in oils. A very considered and economical use of oil pigment. The artist recounts the experience:

There has been a lot of snow this year and the house sparrows have congregated in and around the hedgerow at the bottom of my garden.

Snug and warm in the living room with my binoculars and oils, I watch the comings and goings of these little creatures. Sitting and watching I mix colours. Using a limited pallette, I work over and again on small mix colours. Using a limited palette, I work over and again on small studies, getting to know the sparrow. One minute puffed up, the next, feathers flatten; they become a different bird altogether. Behaviour, shape and pattern all aid me in my exploration in paint.

The ideas that form whilst you’re in the field are crucial to what you produce in the studio; however, that doesn’t mean they have to remain pure and untouched once indoors. Often it will be drawings and notes from weeks, months or even years ago that suddenly emerge from the pile of sketchbooks and demand your attention. No doubt you will recall almost every mark you made at the time, but the feelings you have about the drawings will certainly have altered in some way. And it’s often this change in perspective that makes revisiting older work so exciting and invigorating.



Tim Wootton: a typical workspace. Sketchbooks and coloured

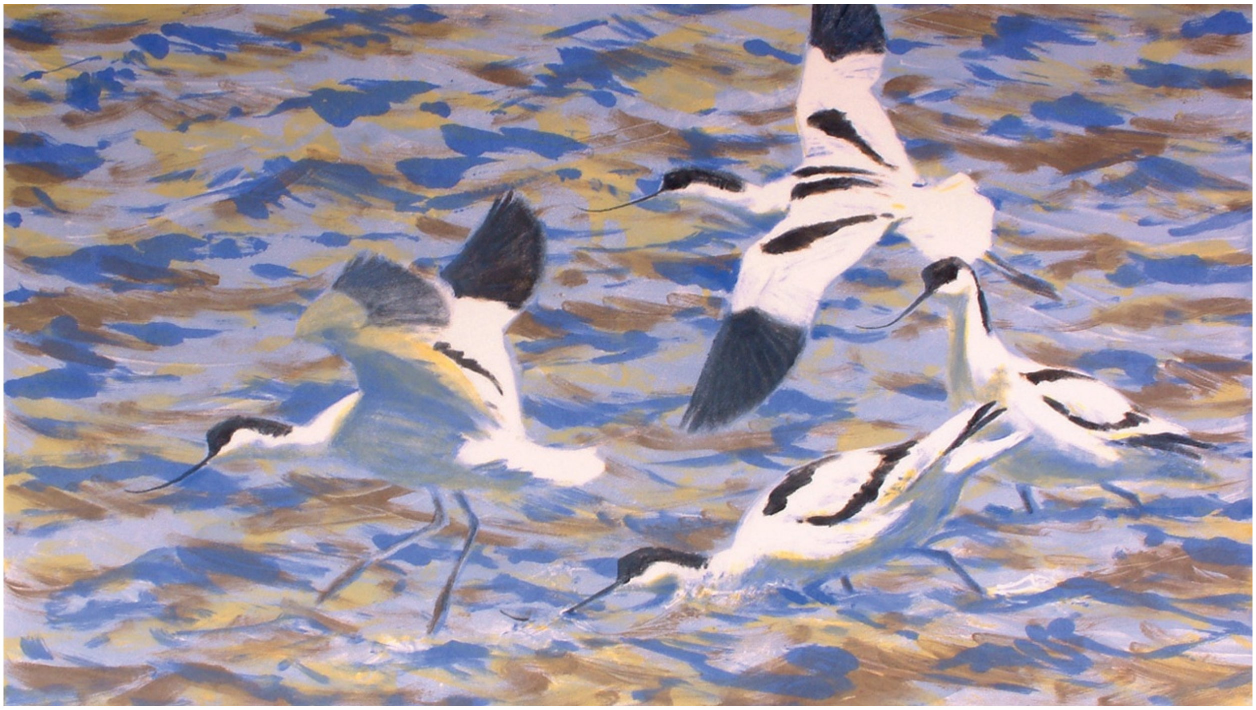
drawings being worked into a finished piece.

Someone who has spent most of his thirty-year career working entirely in the field, Bruce Pearson, has this to say about his modus operandi (from *In A New Light*, Lavenham, 2003):

> The starting point has to be the field experience as pure observation is the raw material – perhaps a few small sketches, a larger more considered drawing, or an ambitious painting which one hopes distils something of the day’s experience. A work straight from the field can sometimes be framed and exhibited as it is; what’s left is taken back to the studio to be viewed in a new light and the snatched ideas worked through in different mediums – relief printing (lino and woodcuts), monotype, silk-screen printing, or oil painting.
>
> Over a period of almost thirty years working as an artist I have travelled widely in search of subjects from the Arctic and Antarctica, to Africa, much of Europe, and the Americas. However, most of my time these days is spent in my studio.
>
> The obsessive urge to head off into the field at every opportunity is transferring itself into an equal desire to work in the studio; to draw much more on the imagination, memory and accumulated experiences lying around.

So the studio is a place for reflection and experimentation, a place where we make art. But it can be virtually anywhere – it’s more a state of mind, I suppose. When I was younger I used my parents’ kitchen table, then a spare bedroom, an old cowshed and then a conservatory, so don’t let the lack of a purpose-built space stop you from creating art. If you can make a space your own for any length of time, it will become your studio and it can revert to being a utility room or greenhouse afterwards.

The one thing a studio really needs is decent lighting, be it from an anglepoise lamp or north-facing floor-to-ceiling windows – you need to be able to see what you’re doing. The work surface could be a table or an easel, or work could be pinned to the wall. A drawing board on your knee could suffice for smallish pieces and table-top easels are useful little things.

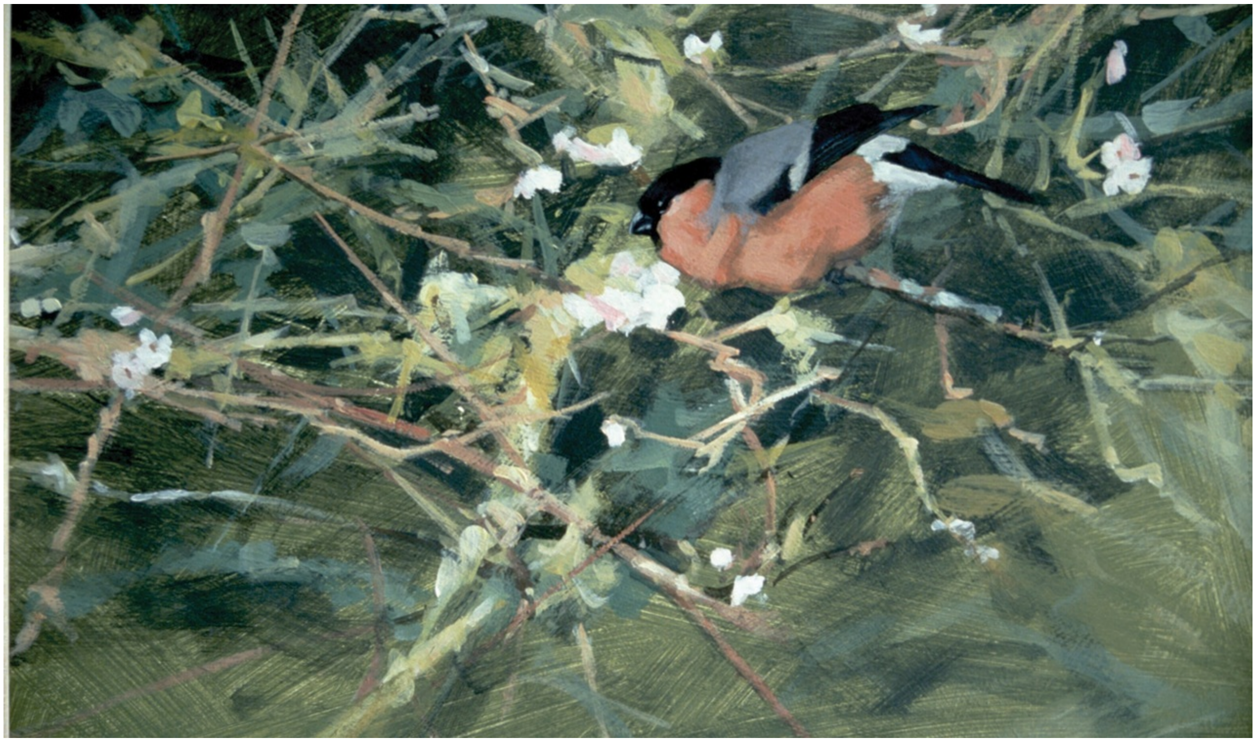


Bruce Pearson: *Avocet Gathering* (monotype).

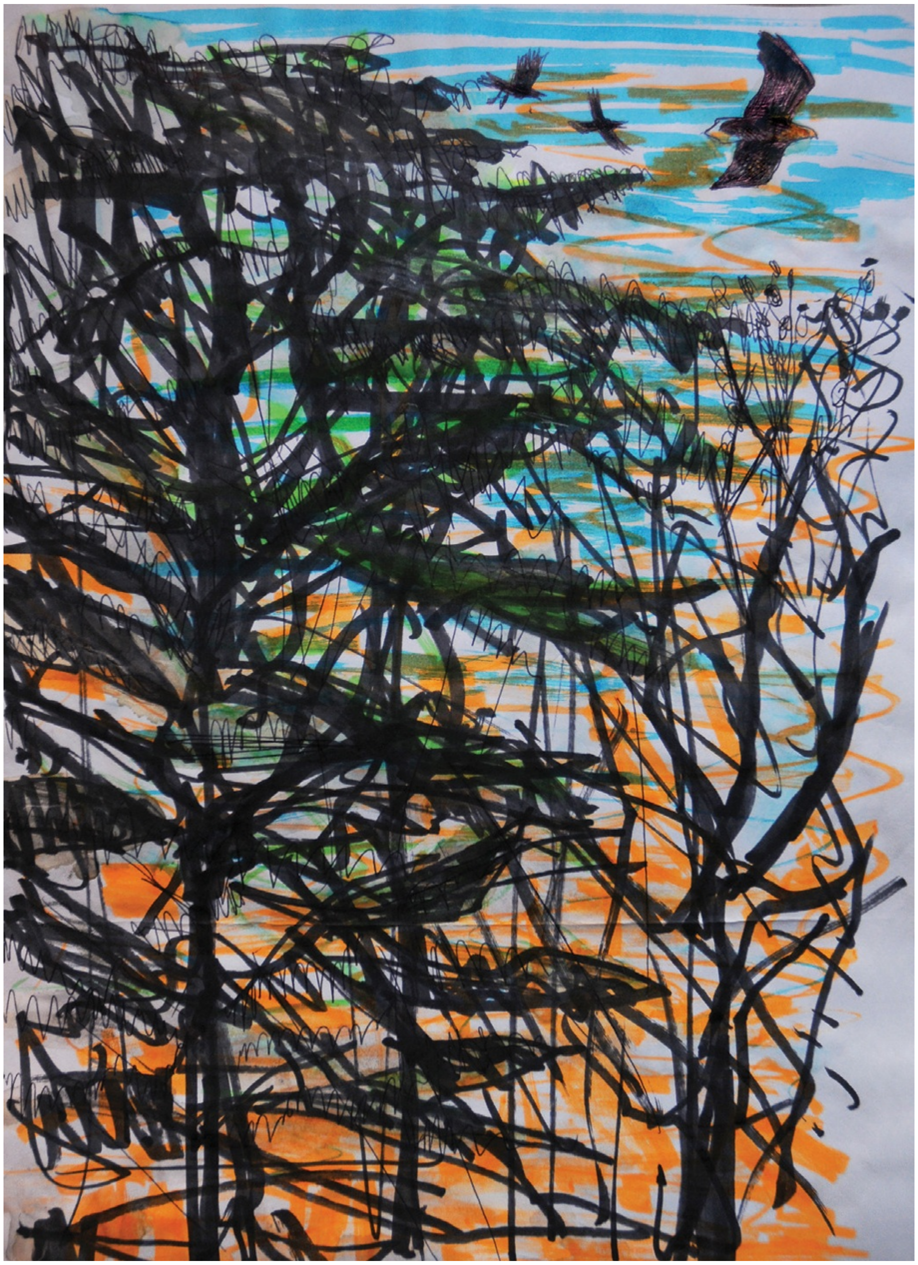
From there on it’s up to you to decide what media to work in, or which process you think would best suit the specific idea you are juggling with. Techniques you may like to tackle (besides the painting methods we touched on earlier) could include collage, lino-cut, woodblock and monotype printing and etching. Painting over prints can be an interesting way of making images too. It’s worth getting a good art-media book that covers techniques and materials; it is a vast subject.

Having time to reflect and make measured decisions about your work may result in a slight loss of spontaneity, but the compensation is that you can do exactly what you what, in your own timescale. In the case of oil painting, where drying times can run into weeks, a certain kind of mind-set is required. Little wonder then that oil painters tend to have several pieces on the go at the same time, which in itself can lead to cross-fertilization of ideas from piece to piece.

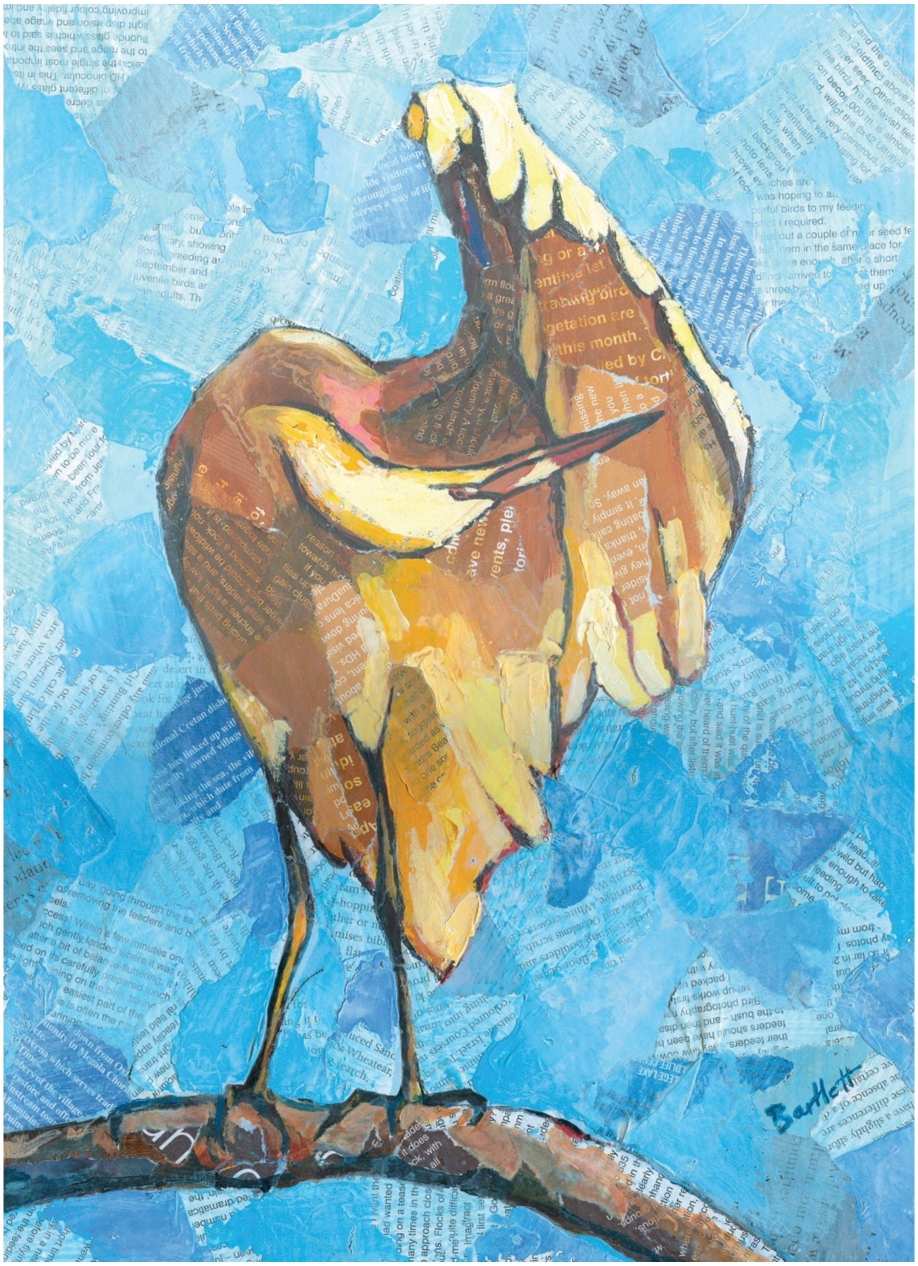
Time in the studio means you can devote time to planning and composition: subjects we will be covering in detail in Chapter 7.



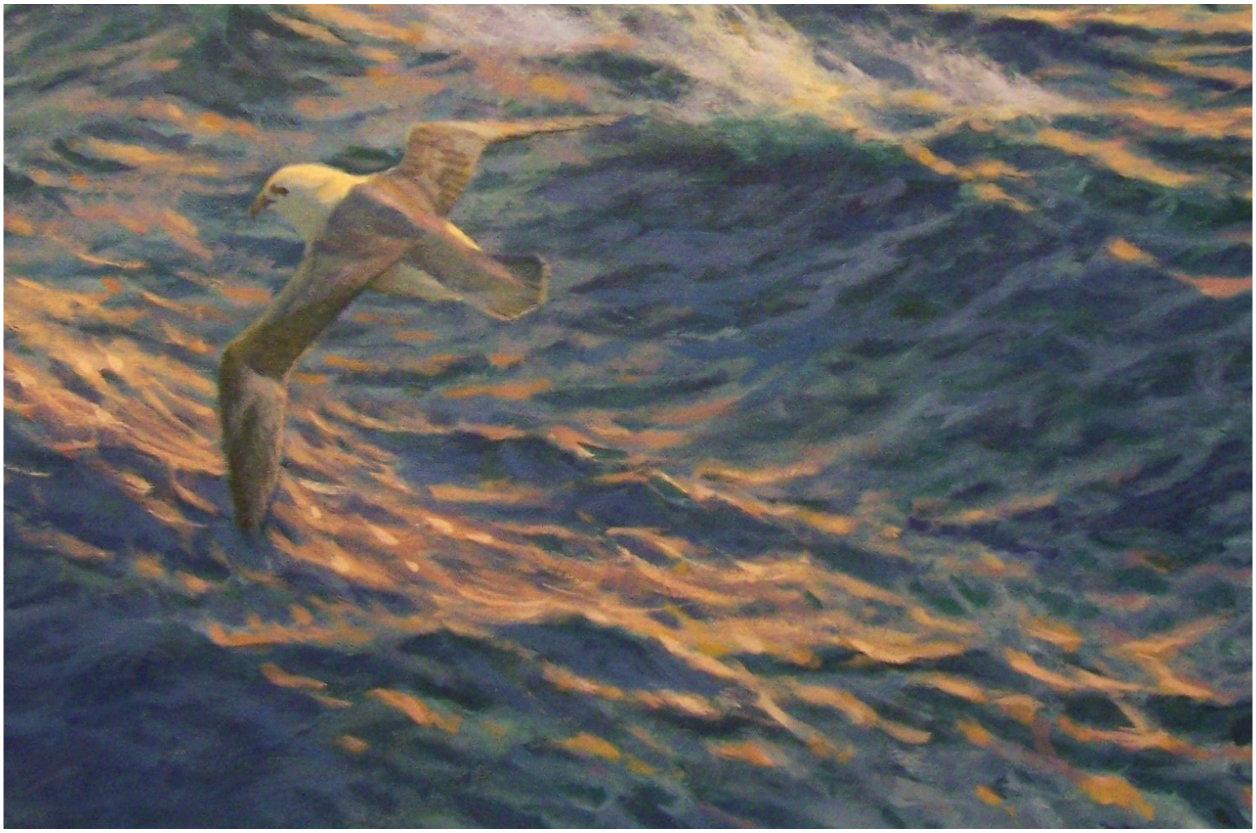
John Threlfall: bullfinch.



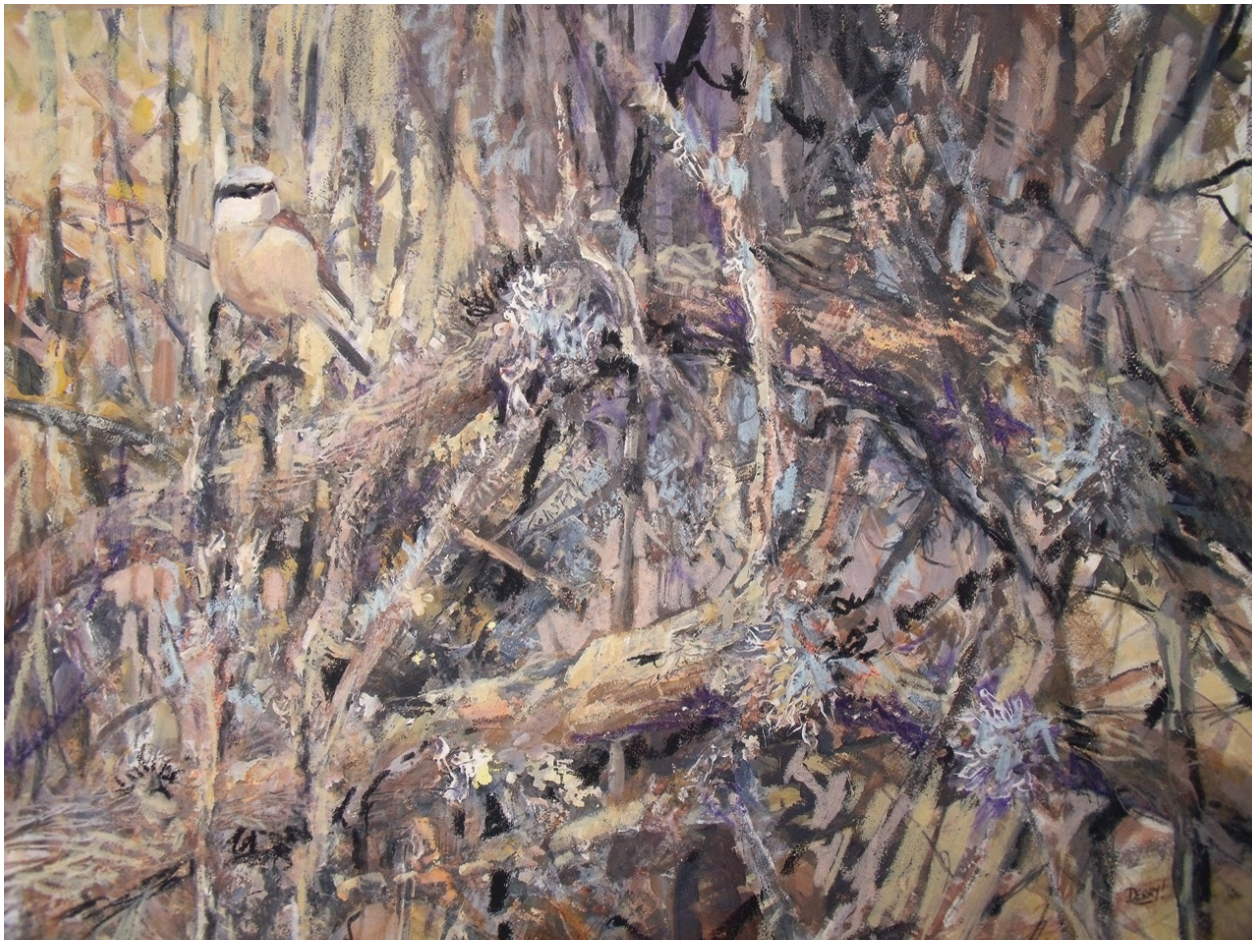
Ed Keeble: white-tailed eagle and crows. Felt tips and highlighter pen.



Paul Bartlett: preening egret. Collage and acrylic paint.



Tim Wootton: *Force-seven Broadsides*. Acrylic on canvas studio painting. Light and water form an irresistible combination; this painting is derived directly from seeing two fulmars on an afternoon dog-walk near my home. Although not late in the day, the northern winter sun was already low in the sky, a spicy 60-knot breeze was whipping spray from the caps of the rolling sea, and spume was collecting in banks along the high tide line. The fulmars just seemed to be enjoying it and I headed straight home, made a drawing in a sketchbook and over the next couple of days painted this piece.



Nick Derry: red-backed shrike. Acrylic on board.

THE SIBERIAN CRANE

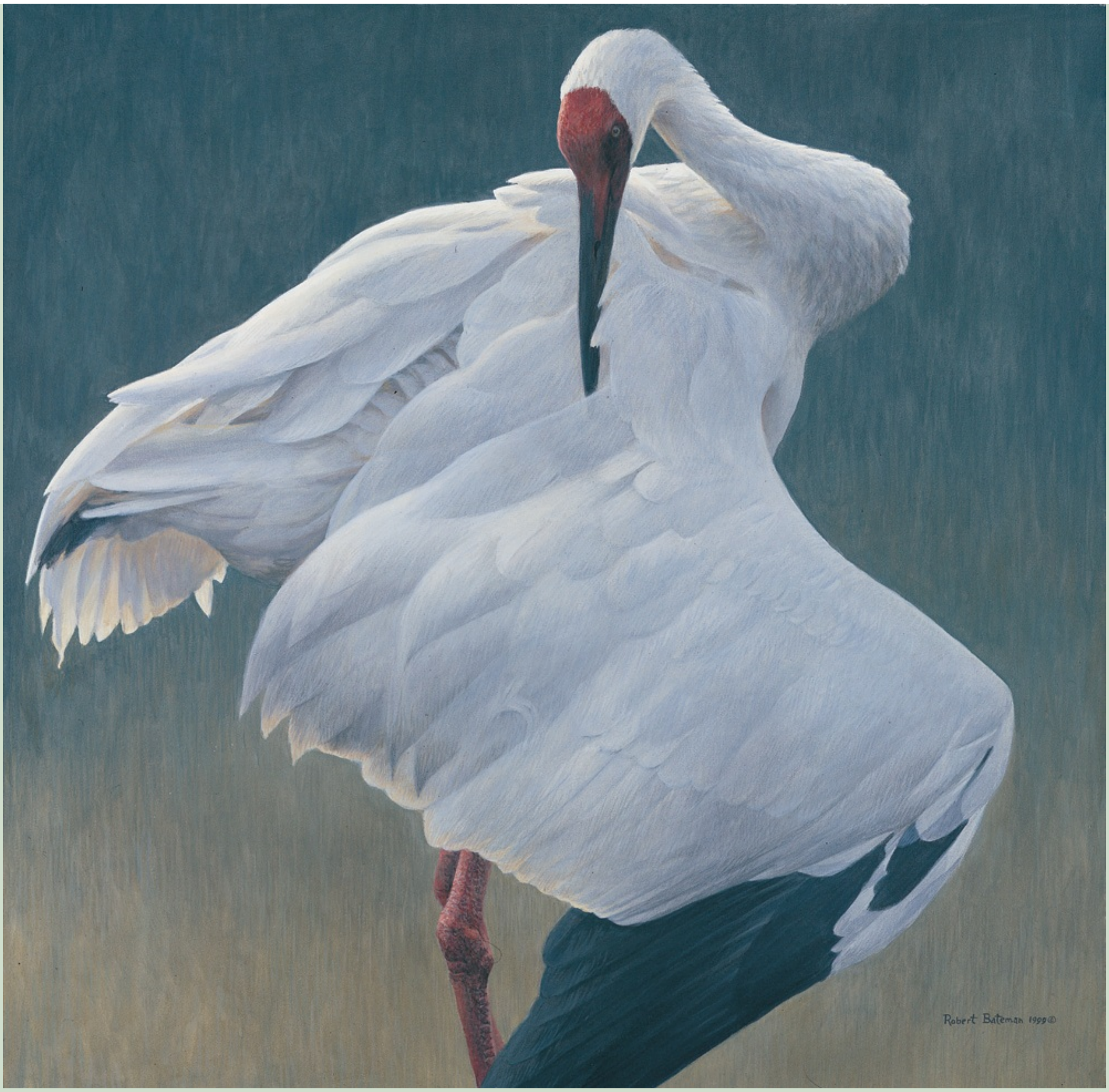
Robert Bateman writes:

Imagine that the fate of your species depended upon some of the most densely populated, strife-torn, environmentally stressed and, in some cases, corrupt places in the world. That is where the future of the Siberian crane lies.

The western population is down to about ten birds; the central population has been reduced to two. The eastern population of approximately 2,500 birds is threatened by the Three Gorges Dam in China. These magnificent birds are the Asian equivalent of the

China. These magnificent birds are the Asian equivalent of the whooping crane. With international efforts and of course financing, the good news story of the whooping cranes could be repeated. At one point their numbers were down to fourteen; now there are 300 to 350 birds.

I based this painting on one of the Siberians at the ICF. He is not preening; he is in a ‘sabre threat pose’. If you don’t get the hint, his next step is to jump you and either spear you with his beak or rake you with his claws. I was very taken by the abstract form in his defiant pose. I hope that in some small way it will help to get the attention of enough people to bring the Siberian crane back from its course towards extinction.


Robert Bateman 1999

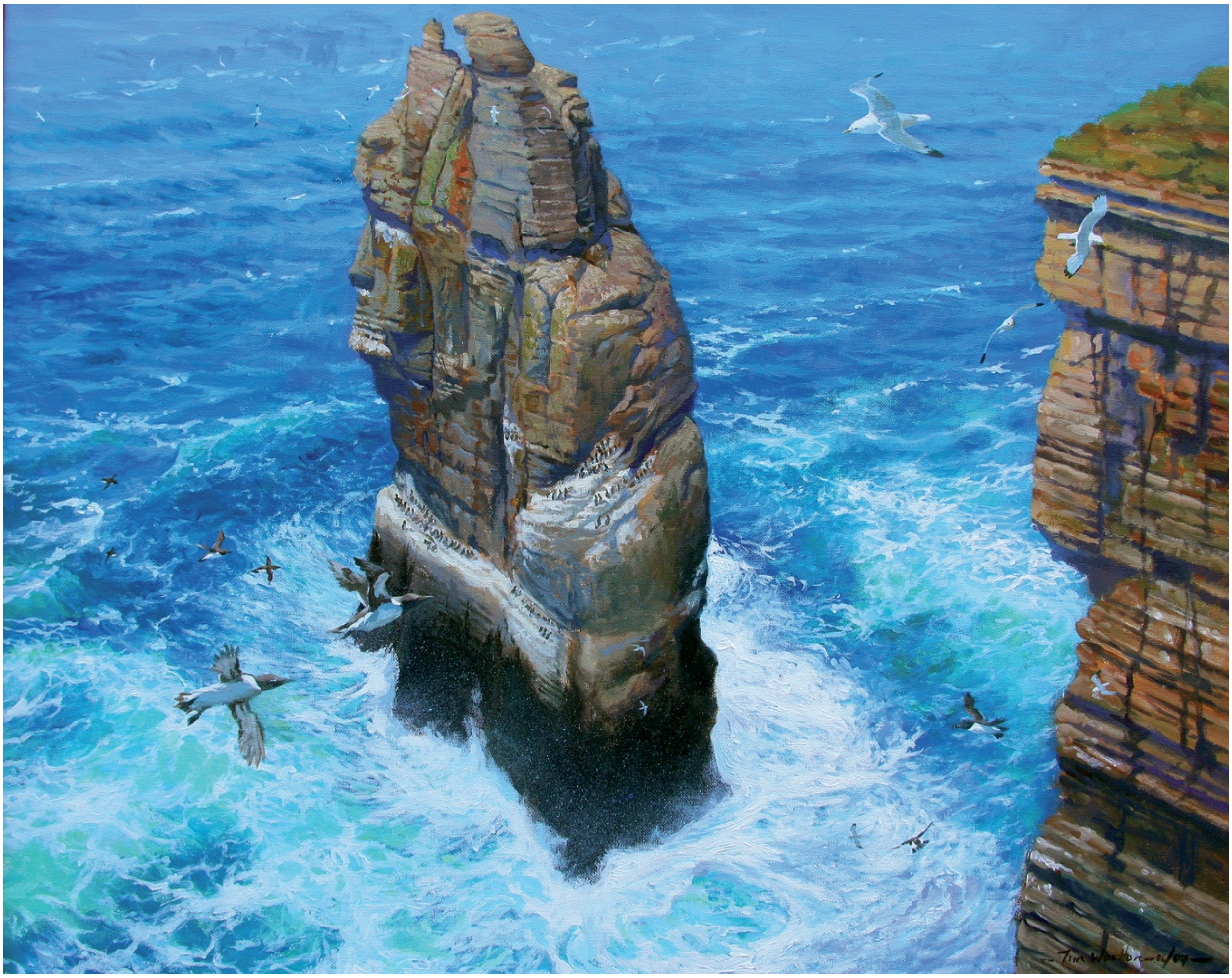
Robert Bateman: *Defensive Stand – Siberian Crane*. 36 × 36in. Acrylic on canvas, 1999.

CHAPTER 6

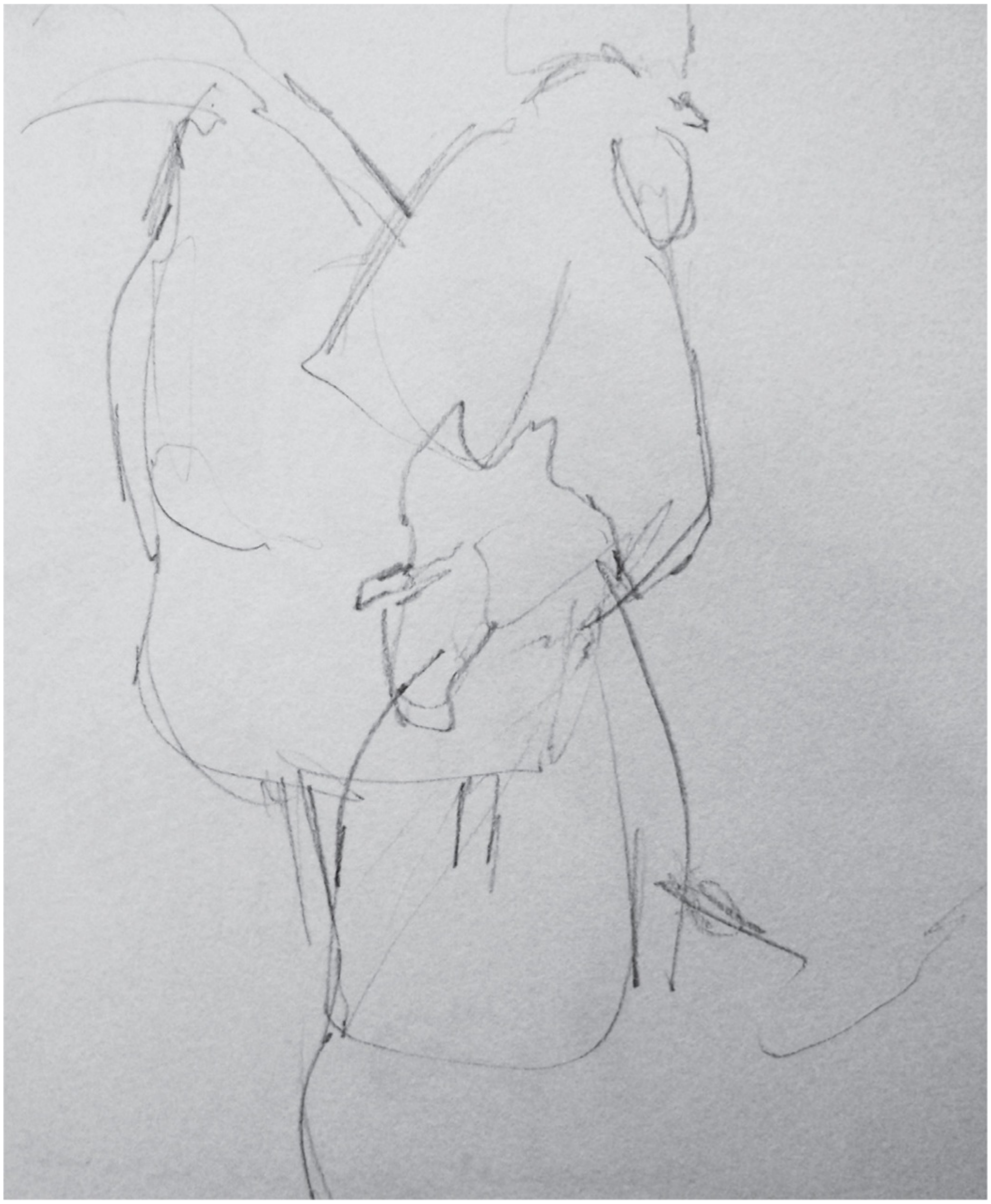
WHAT AND WHERE TO PAINT

Each drawing one makes, each study one paints, is a step forward.
Vincent van Gogh

Draw everywhere and all the time. An artist is a sketchbook with a person attached.
Irwin Greenberg

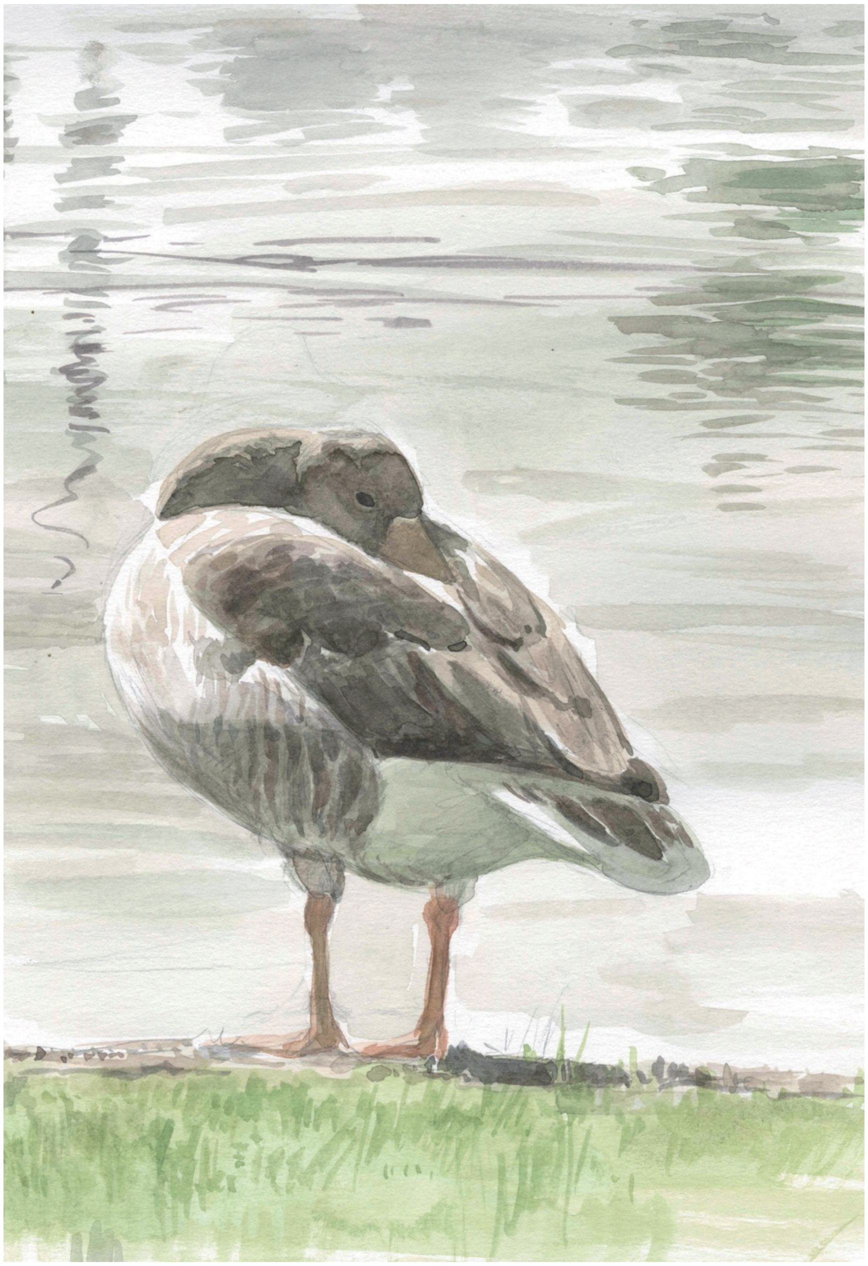


Tim Wootton: *The Standard.*

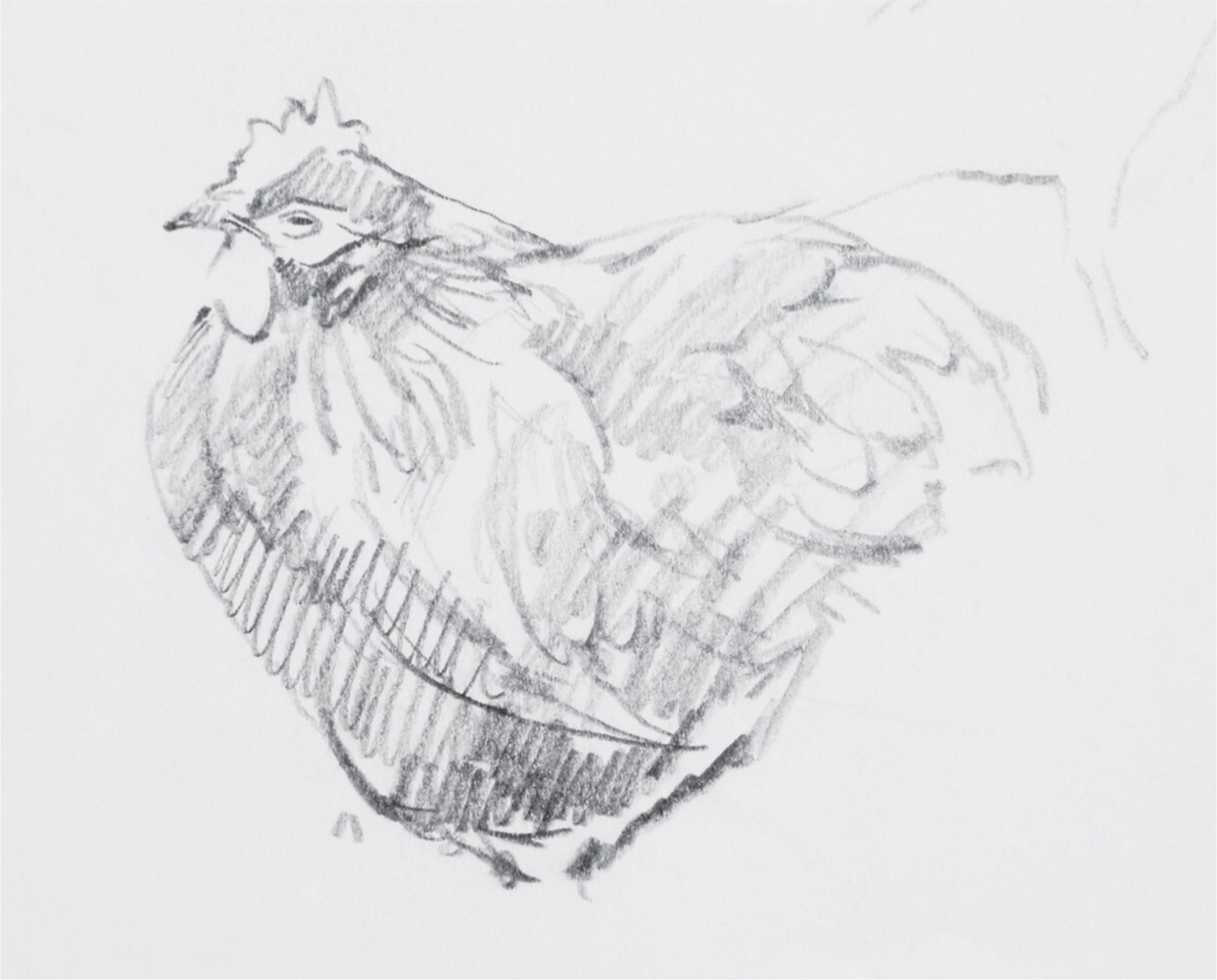


Tim Wootton: Rhode Island red cockerel.

The urge to draw birds can be a strong and compelling one. The way a glint of sunlight catches an eye, condensed and intensely bright; the majestic soaring of large birds of prey; belligerent and argumentative sparrows in the back yard; the noise and clamour of a seabird city assailing the senses with smell, noise and kaleidoscopic views. However you catch the bug, it’s one that is likely to stay with you.



Paschalis Dougalis: greylag goose.

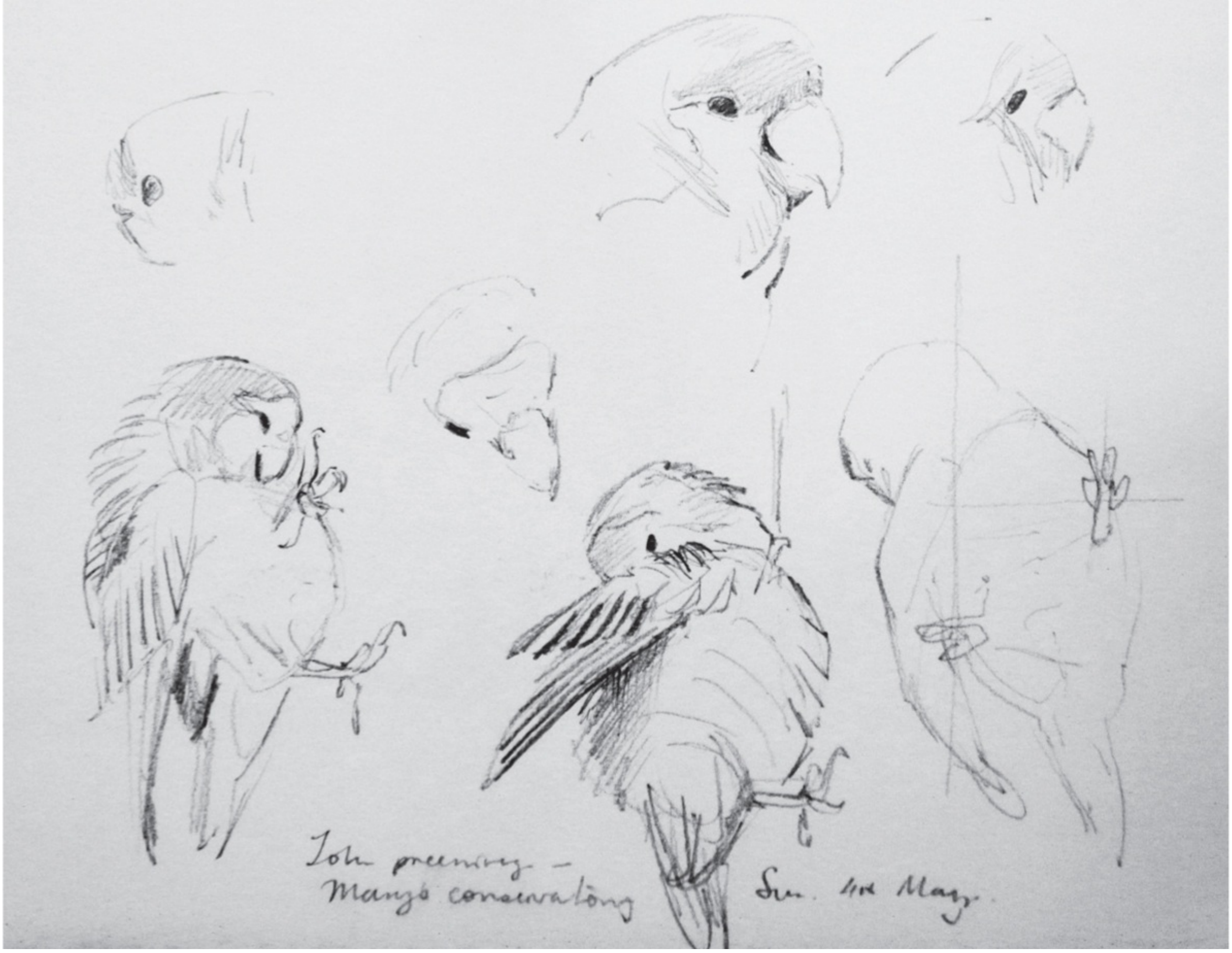


John Busby: bantam.

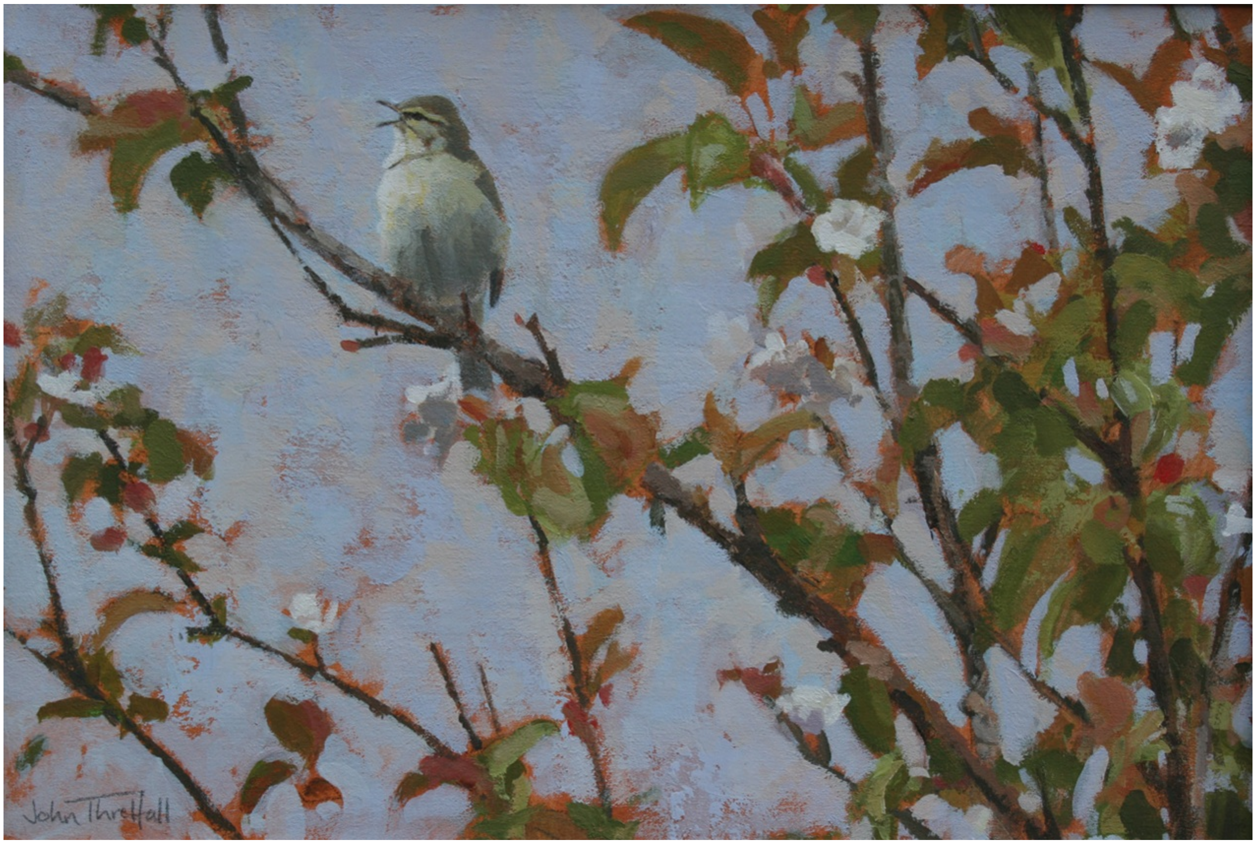
Trying to draw a moving object can be a daunting prospect but it is possible and some of the most beautiful drawings contain some element of motion. If one has a photographic memory that would certainly be a head start, but for the rest of us the process is a little more protracted. Firstly the subject really ought to be seen well – a streak of brown glimpsed peripherally as it disappears into a bush offers the artist little hope of success so it’s advisable to go where the birds can be seen well, and often. Sea cliffs, back gardens, parks, ponds and lakes – even sewage works and refuse tips.

Finding birds can be a tricky business, but also a very rewarding one. In fact the pursuit of birds can become an obsessive pastime in its own right and many of the top bird artists are also accomplished ornithologists.

Opportunities to observe birds at close hand needn’t mean organizing an expedition; indeed suitable subjects can be found almost anywhere, such as parks, gardens and lakes, wildlife reserves. A few crusts thrown in the back garden will attract sparrows, starlings and pigeons – all valid subjects for the wildlife artist and invaluable for practice at looking, mark-making and learning to draw quickly. You will also notice a certain amount of repetition of shapes. Birds will, from time to time, return to the same or similar postures, forming common angles and lines.



Tim Wootton: *John*, a peach-faced lovebird, drawn from a captive-bred bird.

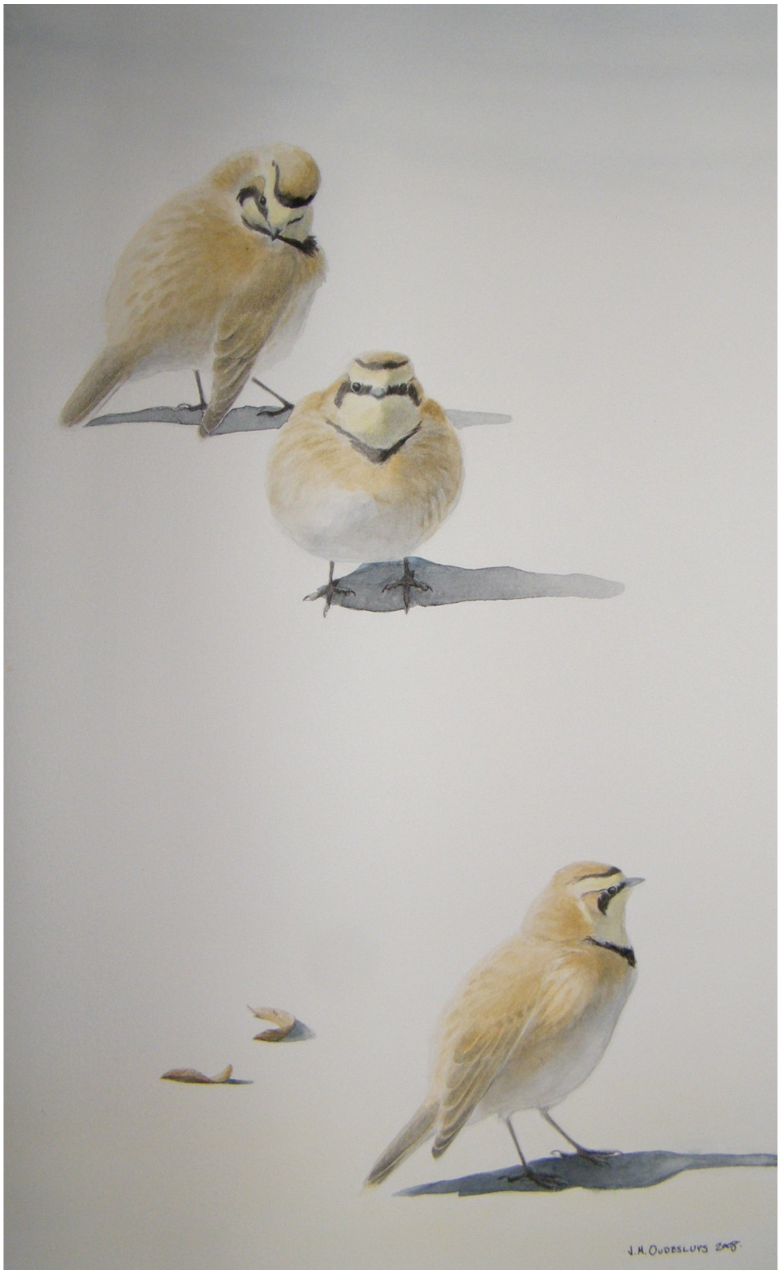


John Threlfall: willow warbler.

The main advantage of working from subjects close to the house is a comfortable and ready-made bird hide. You can sketch through a kitchen window safe in the knowledge that the birds aren’t likely to be disturbed by you and, in turn, you aren’t going to be interrupted by passers-by (many of us can be rather self-conscious about our artistic endeavours and quite understandably shy away from the scrutiny of observers).

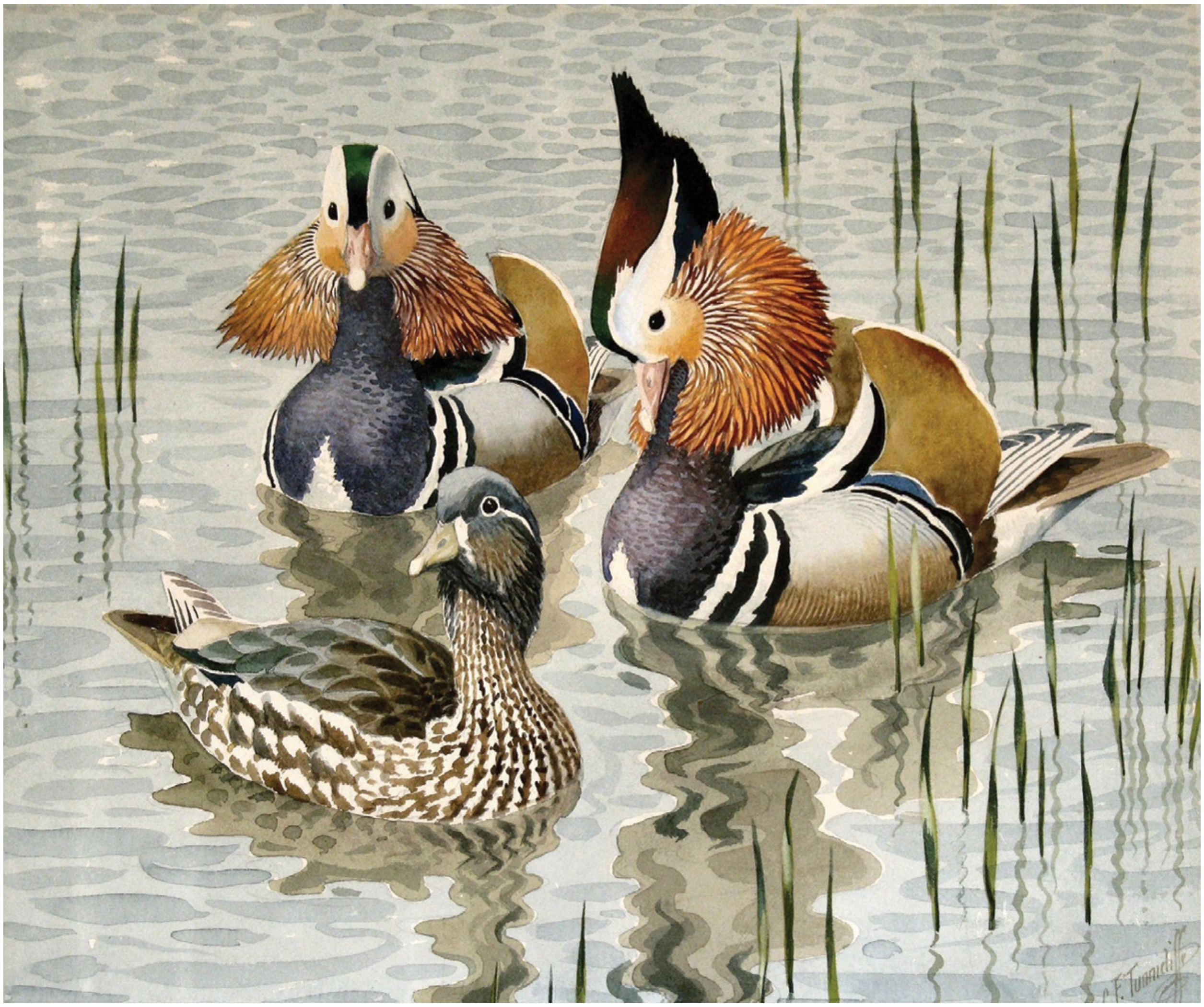
The birds can be attracted to various areas of the garden: food can be put on the bird table or scattered across the lawn; a shallow pond or birdbath will get regular usage and, if suitable perches are available, the birds will be encouraged to stay and preen (inspecting and re-arranging their feathers) after bathing. This is when birds offer such wonderful and unexpected shapes and postures to the enquiring eye. Above all though, there is the potential to view birds of a feather, and different species, interacting with each other – the way a robin will dominate a feeding area even when larger rivals may be in attendance; how starlings will clamour and argue over titbits of food; the aerobatic dexterity of the humble sparrow in pursuit of airborne insects. As an artist you ought always to be aware of the dynamic compositions that groups of birds create. Opportunities to study the relative scale of different species and of individuals to other objects should never be wasted. Even lawns with the shortest grass will obscure the feet and much of the legs of sparrows and other small birds as they forage. Getting the correct scale in a drawing will go a long way towards making a convincing piece of work.

When searching for subjects, don’t overlook the obvious. Farmyards hold much of interest for the bird artist. There will be domestic fowl of many shapes, sizes and colours. There may be ducks and geese, and many of the wild birds that associate with this rural environment, such as doves, starlings and sparrows, will also be attracted to the farm to feed and to find suitable places to nest and rear their young. There will be the opportunity to observe and study birds undertaking a variety of activities: feeding and scratching, bathing, preening and loafing and even incubating eggs and brooding young. Aviaries are obvious but overlooked sources of information. Clearly the birds aren’t in a natural state, but if kept well, can show all the aspects of natural behaviour required by the artist.

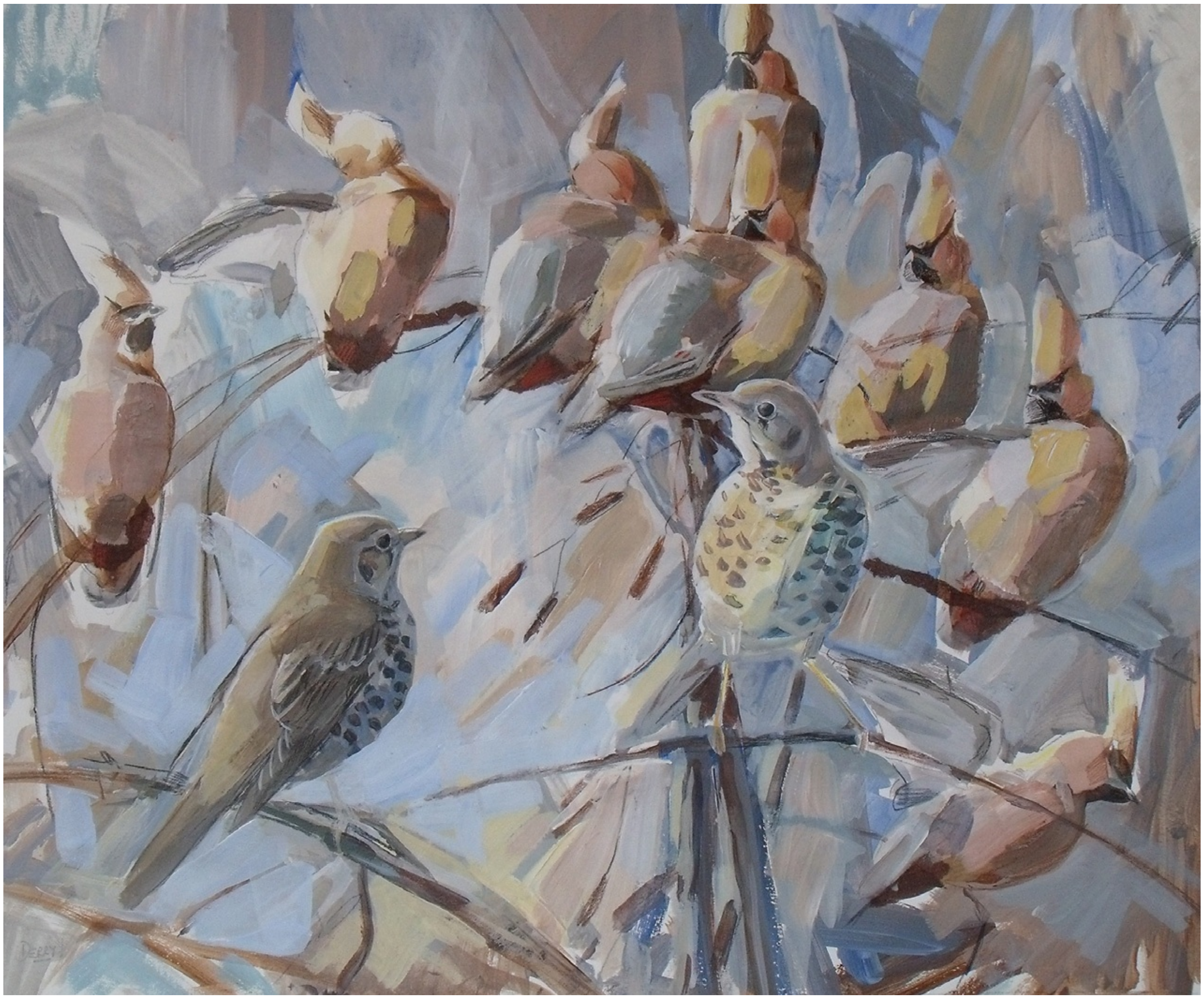


Jocelyn Oudesluys: horned larks on the beach.

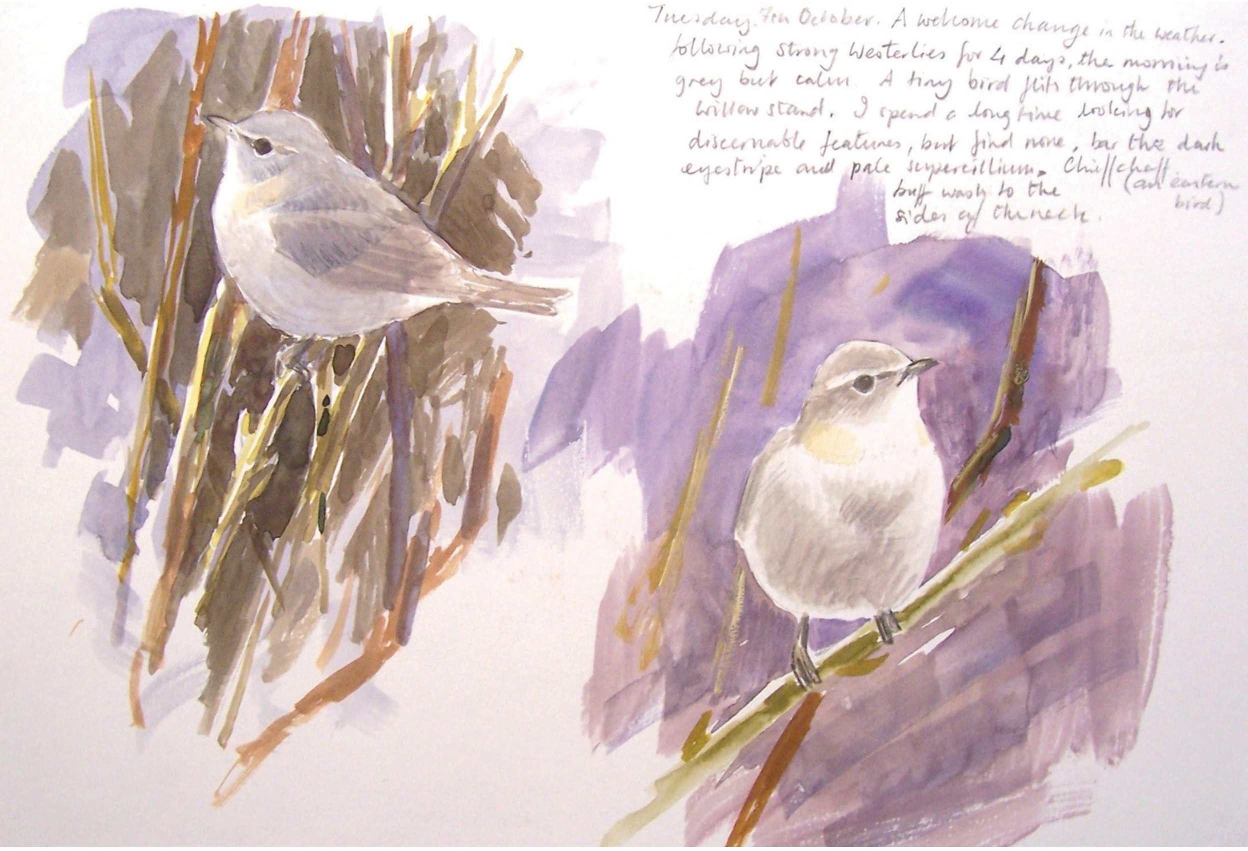
Woodlands are great places to find birds, but the nature of the habitat often means that they are difficult to see and, when they do condescend to show themselves, it’s usually only briefly before they disappear into the undergrowth and out of sight. Forward planning can be extremely beneficial in this environment. Certainly the use of a hide of some kind – a drape or just concealing oneself – can be profitable, but often all you really need to do is to sit quietly and let the birds show themselves to you. Get to know the layout of the woodland and try to visit often and at different times of the day (and night, if possible). If there is a pond or stream, the birds will certainly be using it to drink from or bathe in. Finding discreet positions overlooking these features will bring good opportunities to see birds at close quarters. Stalking birds in woodlands is unlikely to bring positive results. You may get to see the bird, but more often than not, the bird will be away before you have time to prepare yourself for drawing. If, however, you can make yourself comfortable and relaxed, when the birds appear you will be ready to draw and will also be less likely to scare the birds away.



C.F. Tunnicliffe: *Mandarins*. These splendid Asian ducks are often kept in wildfowl collections and a feral population has become established in the south of England.



Nick Derry: waxwings and song thrushes.

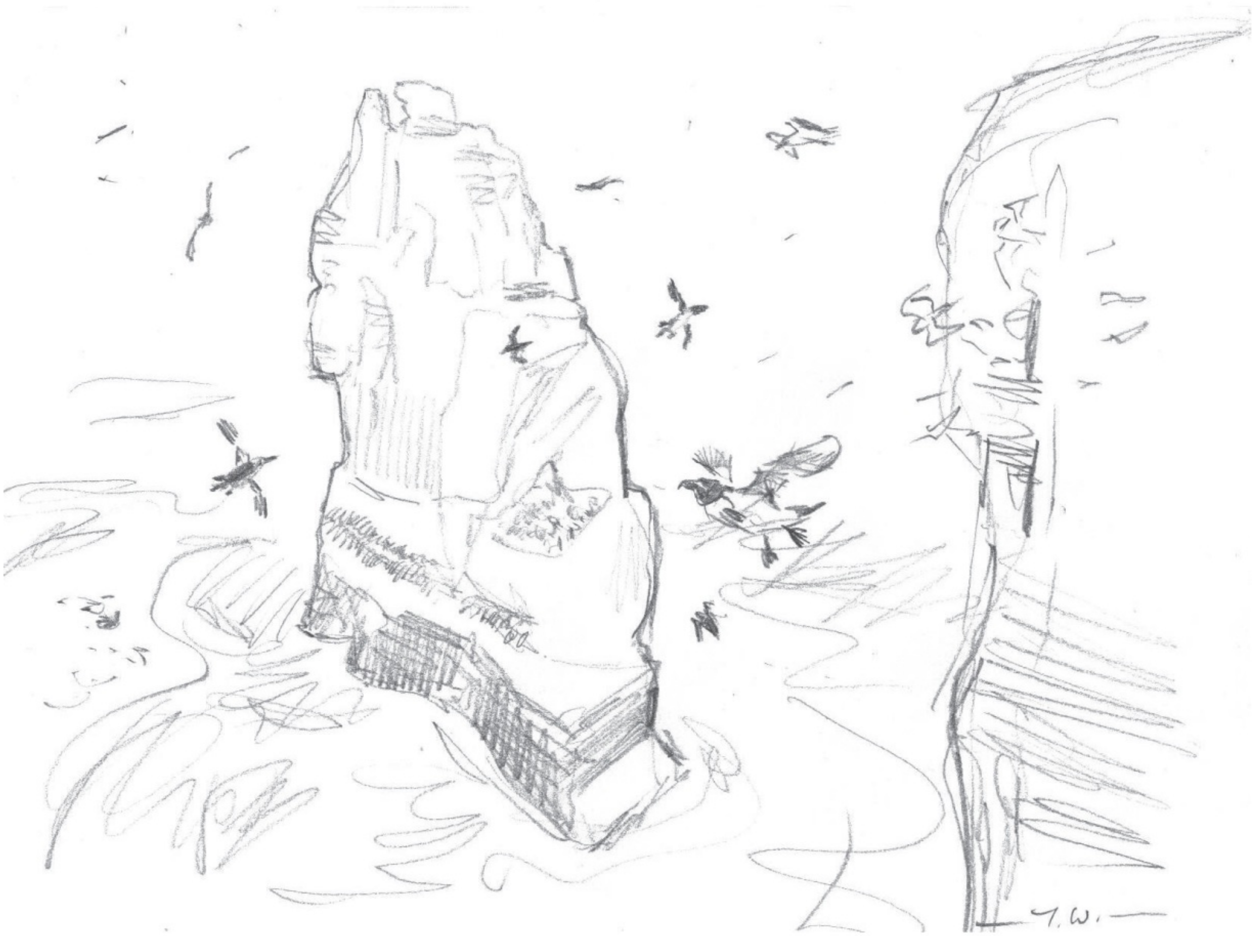


Tuesday. 7th October. A welcome change in the weather. following strong Westerlies for 4 days, the morning is grey but calm. A tiny bird flits through the willow stand. I spend a long time looking for discernable features, but find none, bar the dark eyestripe and pale supercillium. Chiffchaff (an eastern bird)

buff wash to the sides of the neck.

Tim Wootton: studies of a chiffchaff.

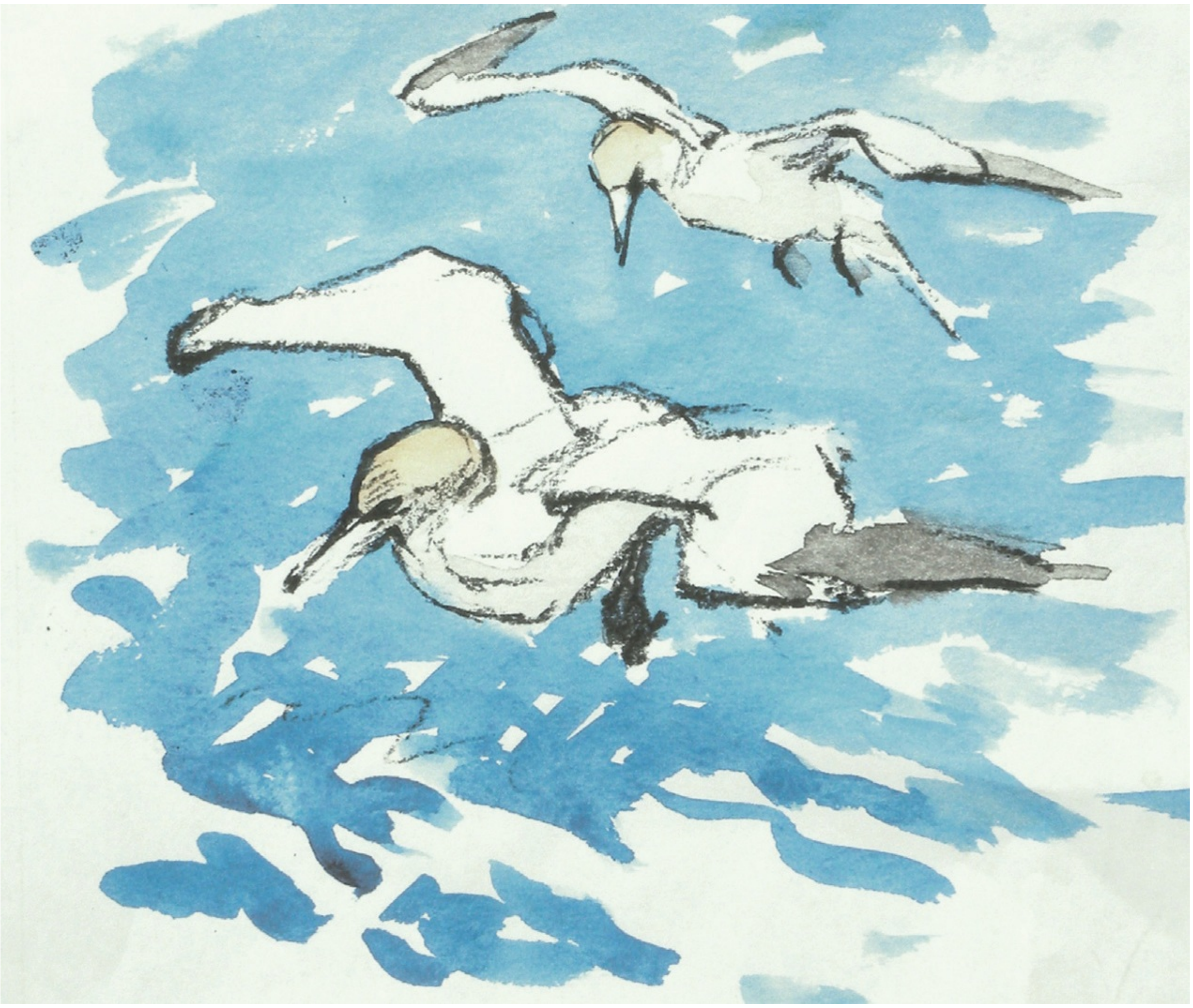
It may be worth considering baiting an area too. By placing small amounts of grain in strategic places you can encourage birds to that area; however, if you enter into this activity, remember that birds will come to rely on there being a source of food there and you must not cut off that supply; rather reduce the feed over a period of weeks. Birds use a lot of energy locating food, so it is important not to make them waste more than they need to.



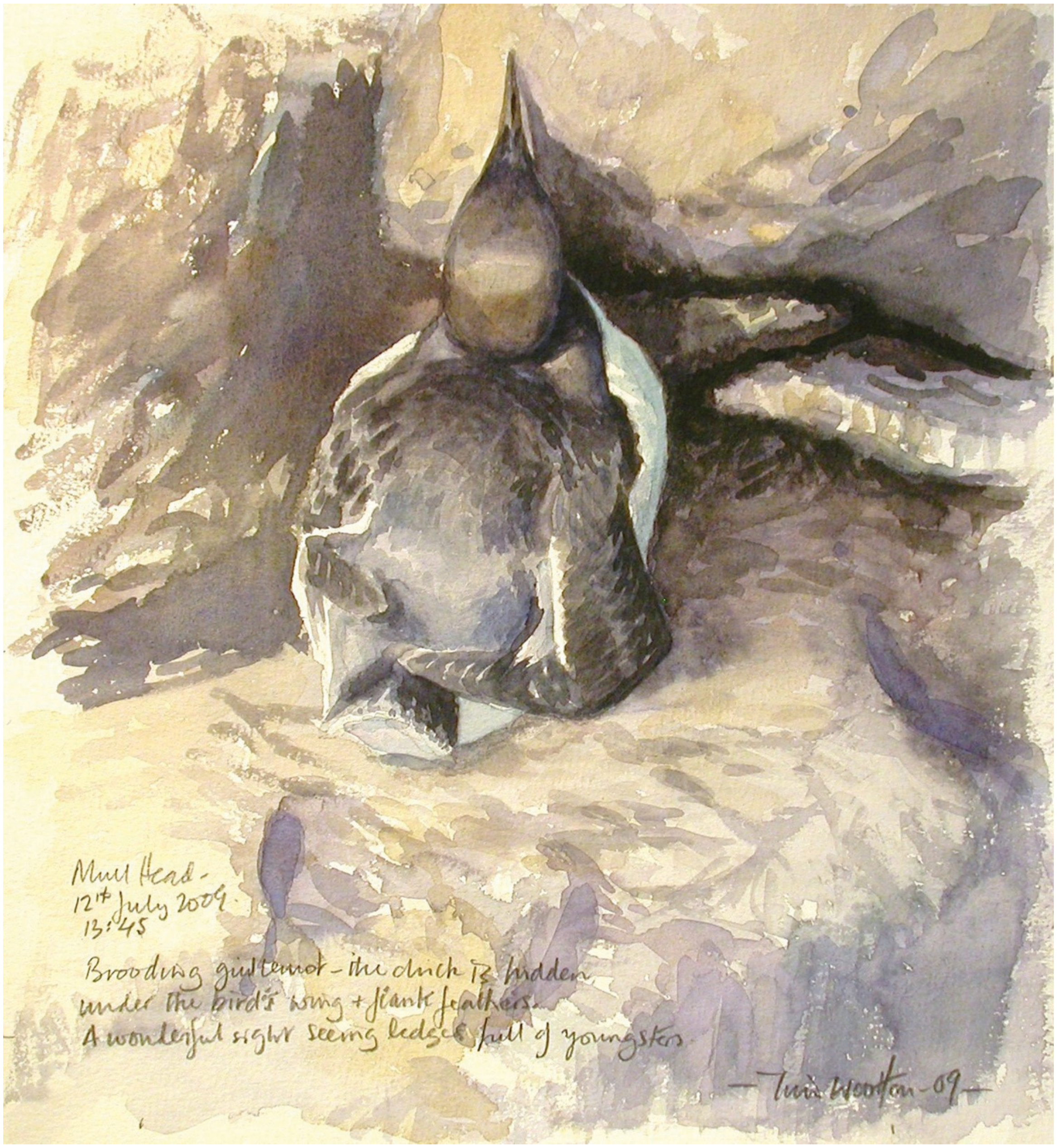
Tim Wootton: a cliff-top sketch.

The main thing to remember about woodland birdwatching is to know when the birds are likely to be most visible. The hours of dawn and, to a lesser extent, dusk are the periods to focus on. During the spring and early summer the birds will be concentrating on nesting and breeding and males of many species are territorial towards other males of the same type (although they are often unconcerned about different species). This time of year is one of heightened activity and the males will be conspicuous, posturing and displaying, calling and singing and, later in the season, adult birds will be hunting for food to feed the growing chicks.

For the densest concentrations of birds, the seaside is the place to go. In spring and summer seabirds return to the cliffs and rocky islands to breed, many having spent the winter far out at sea. Where these birds congregate are some of the most exciting spectacles of the natural world. Huge numbers of auks (the family of birds which includes guillemots, razorbills and puffins) return to their traditional breeding sites around the rocky coasts of the northern seas. They may be joined by other species such as gannet, kittiwake and other gull species, rock doves and predators which rely on breeding and feeding close to these huge seabird cities. Peregrine falcons are masters of their domain and their presence enriches and enlivens any birdwatching trip to the coast; other predatory birds such as the skuas may also be encountered. The birds here will be easy to see and, perhaps because of safety in numbers, or their inaccessibility to humans, are less likely to be frightened away by your presence. The sheer vertical cliffs also mean birds have to approach by air, offering spectacular aerobatic displays and wonderful opportunities to observe birds in flight at close hand. Moreover, they are excellent places to develop the skill of drawing birds in flight, as birds in the air will regularly make the same shapes over and over again. This gives the chance to return to an already started drawing and add further detail to it.



John Busby: gannets. These are large, statuesque birds, which regularly hang in the wind – superb subjects for any artist who wishes to study the dynamics of flight.

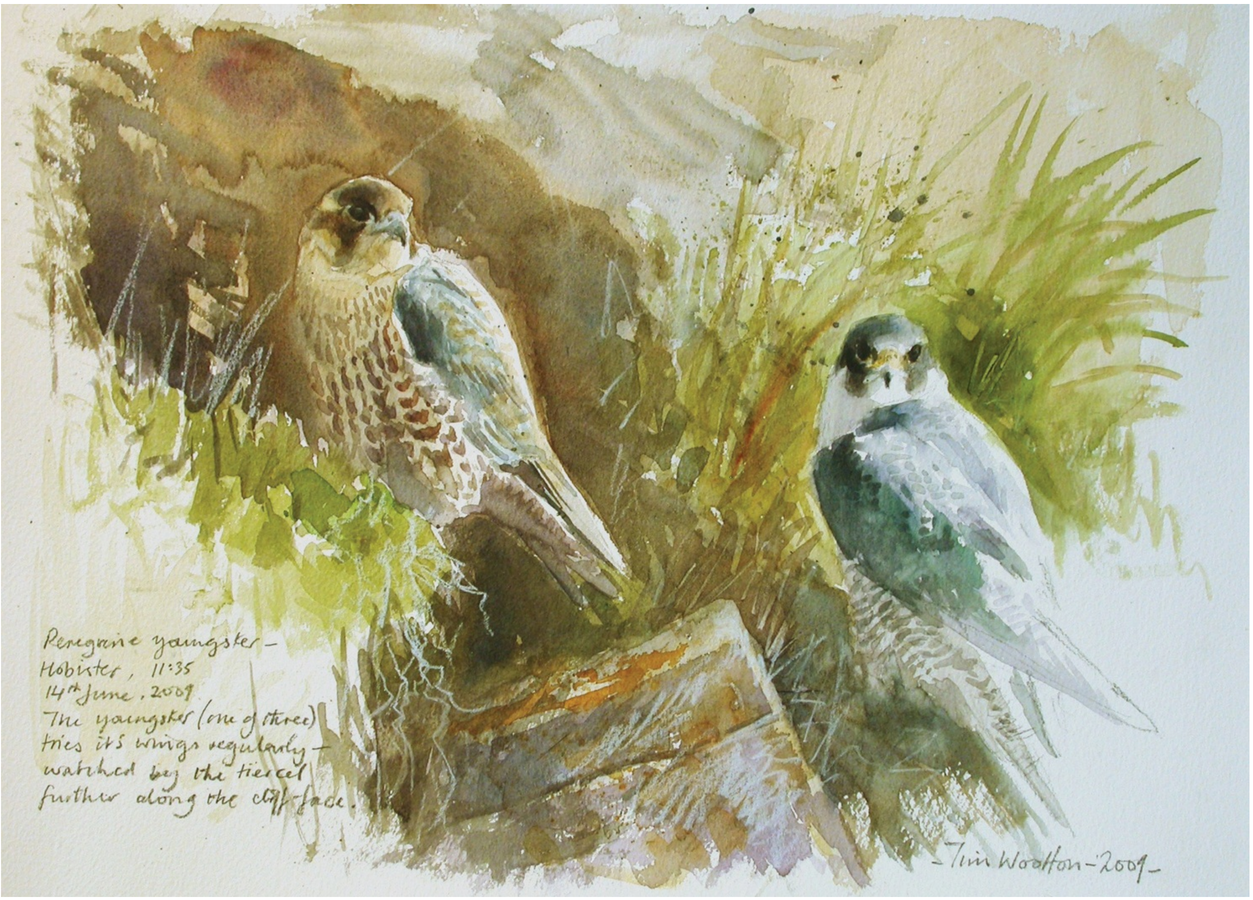


Mull Head -
12th July 2009.
13:45

Brooding guillemot - the chick is hidden
under the bird's wing + flank feathers.
A wonderful sight seeing ledges full of youngsters

- Tim Wootton -09 -

Tim Wootton: brooding guillemot. In summer the cliffs will be teeming with birds and if you don’t try to approach too closely none of them will be interested in what you are doing; this is when you can observe birds at their most relaxed.


Peregrine youngster –
Hobister, 11:35
14th June, 2009
The youngster (one of three)
tries it's wings regularly –
watched by the tiercel
further along the cliff-face.
– Tim Wootton – 2009 –

Tim Wootton: peregrine and young, field study. Always be mindful of the needs of the birds and the laws regulating their disturbance; these studies were made from an adjacent headland from the eyrie and from a distance of 300 metres using a high-powered telescope. The birds knew I was there but were completely at ease.

Watching and drawing birds in a cliff-top environment is an extremely thrilling but potentially dangerous experience. Safety on the cliffs is of paramount importance. Make sure you settle down to work in a suitable place and never be tempted to get too close to the edge. Always ensure your equipment is easily accessible and that loose bits of paper will not fly out of sketchpads – the urge to grab at airborne drawings can be compelling, but when you’re a hundred feet or more above the waves this is a temptation that ought to be resisted!

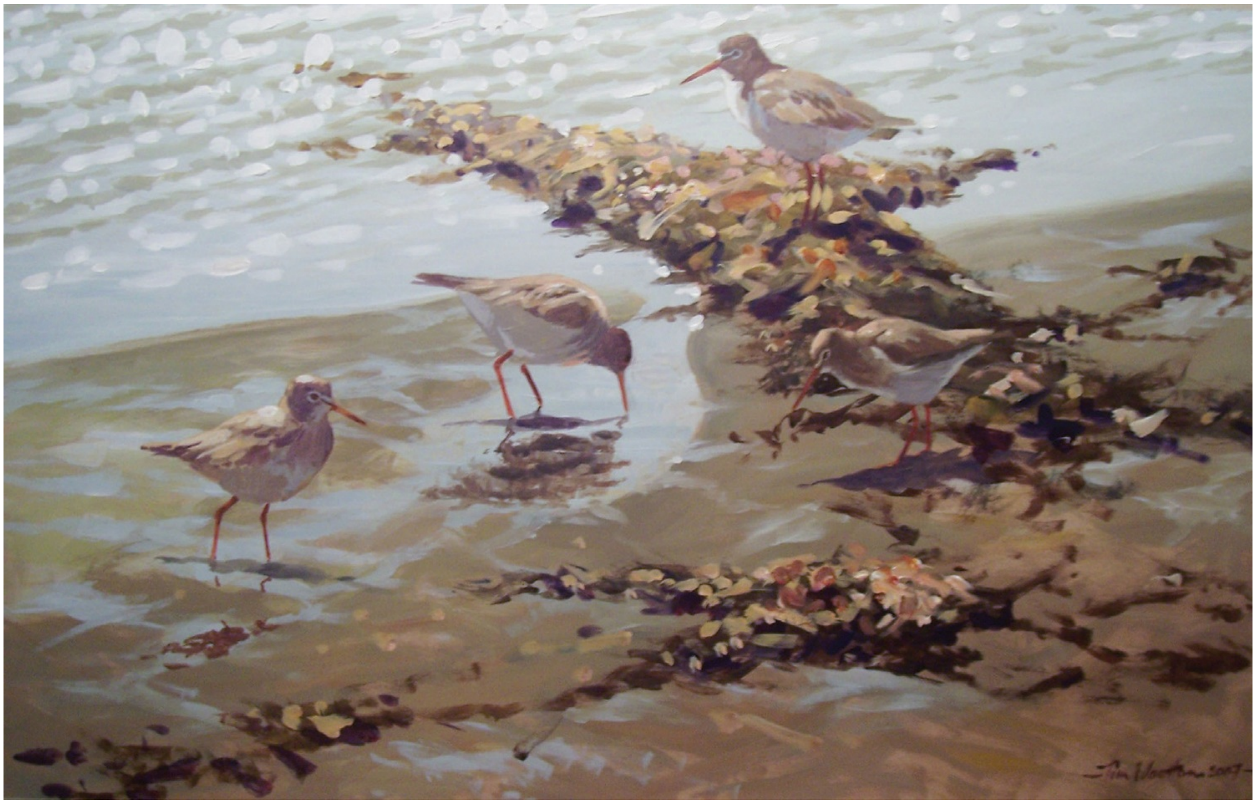
The other classic seaside environment where lots of birds gather is where a river meets the sea – the estuary. Estuaries present birds with much that they require. The open aspect of the landscape means they can see potential predators from afar and the rich muddy substrates contain food items such as molluscs, worms, vegetable matter and fish. These locations are used by birds throughout the year, but it is during autumn and winter that they really gather en masse. Wading birds, having completed their breeding cycle, move to these coastal locations to moult (replace their feathers), feed and rest. When the tide is out the birds may be spread across many acres of inaccessible mud, too far away for decent views to be had by the artist. However, as the tide flows, the feeding grounds submerge and disappear. They move with the tide to higher ground where they will preen their plumage and roost until the receding water once again exposes their feeding areas. The birds may be quite flighty at this time, however, and it is a good idea to get into position before the birds arrive. Furthermore, they are far more likely to accept you as part of the landscape and behave naturally in your presence.

You could use a hide (there are purpose-made structures available, but a tent or even a fisherman’s shelter will suffice, as long as you have decent views out of it and it masks your outline from the birds). In some circumstances a car may double as a hide but working conditions may be a little cramped. Merely hunkering down beside some rocks near the high-tide line means that you will be in place and able to begin work as soon as the birds come into range.

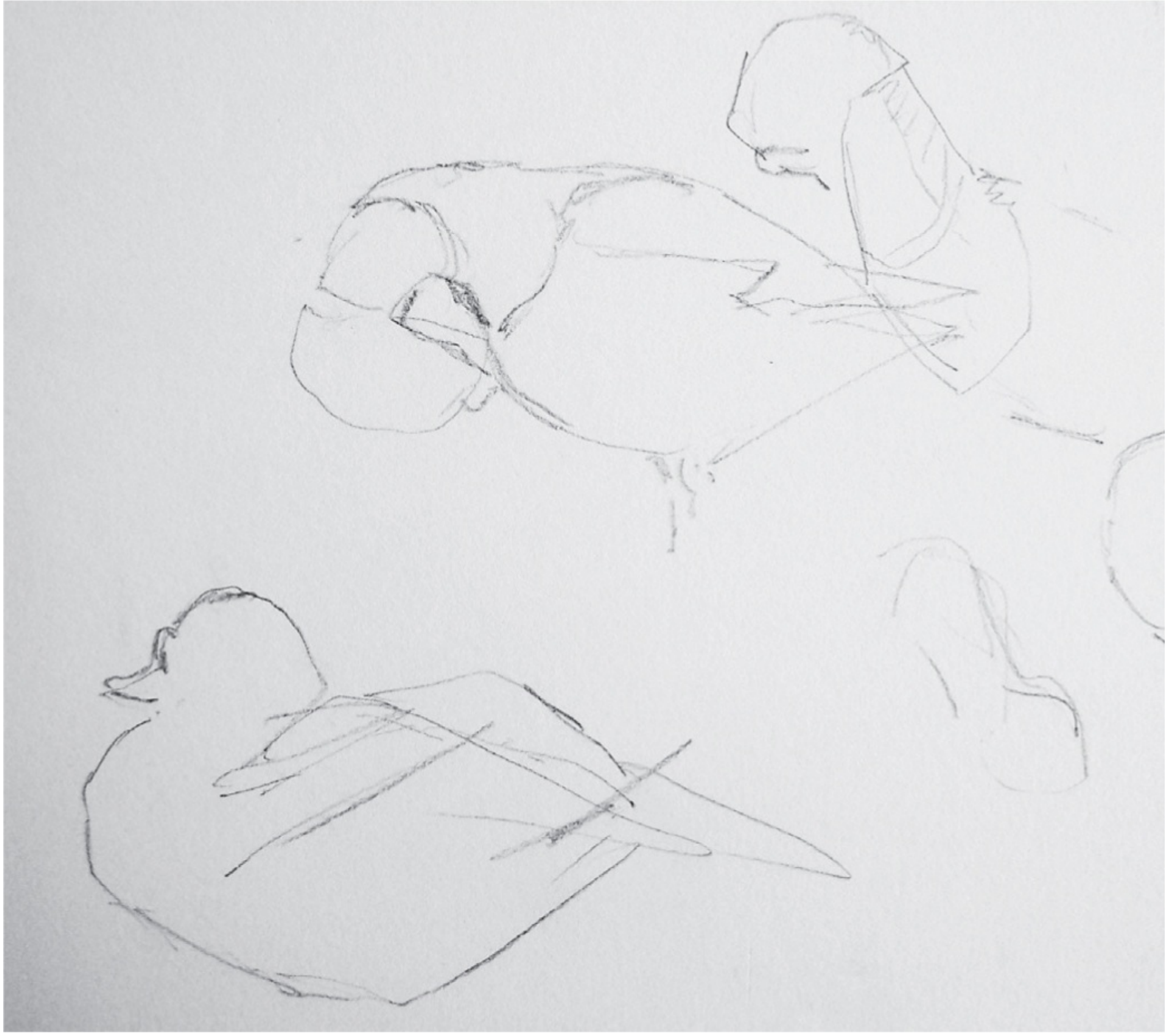
Always plan ahead: it is likely that you will be fairly static for quite some time so always take plenty of warm clothing and food and drink. It can be very annoying to have spent an hour or so waiting for the advancing tide to flush the birds close enough for study to find your hands are too cold to hold the pencil and you’re too hungry to concentrate. Always be aware of what the tide is doing, and assess what it is going to do. Never set up to work on rocks or patches of beach that may become cut off by the tide. Always look for a suitable site above the strand line (high-tide mark).

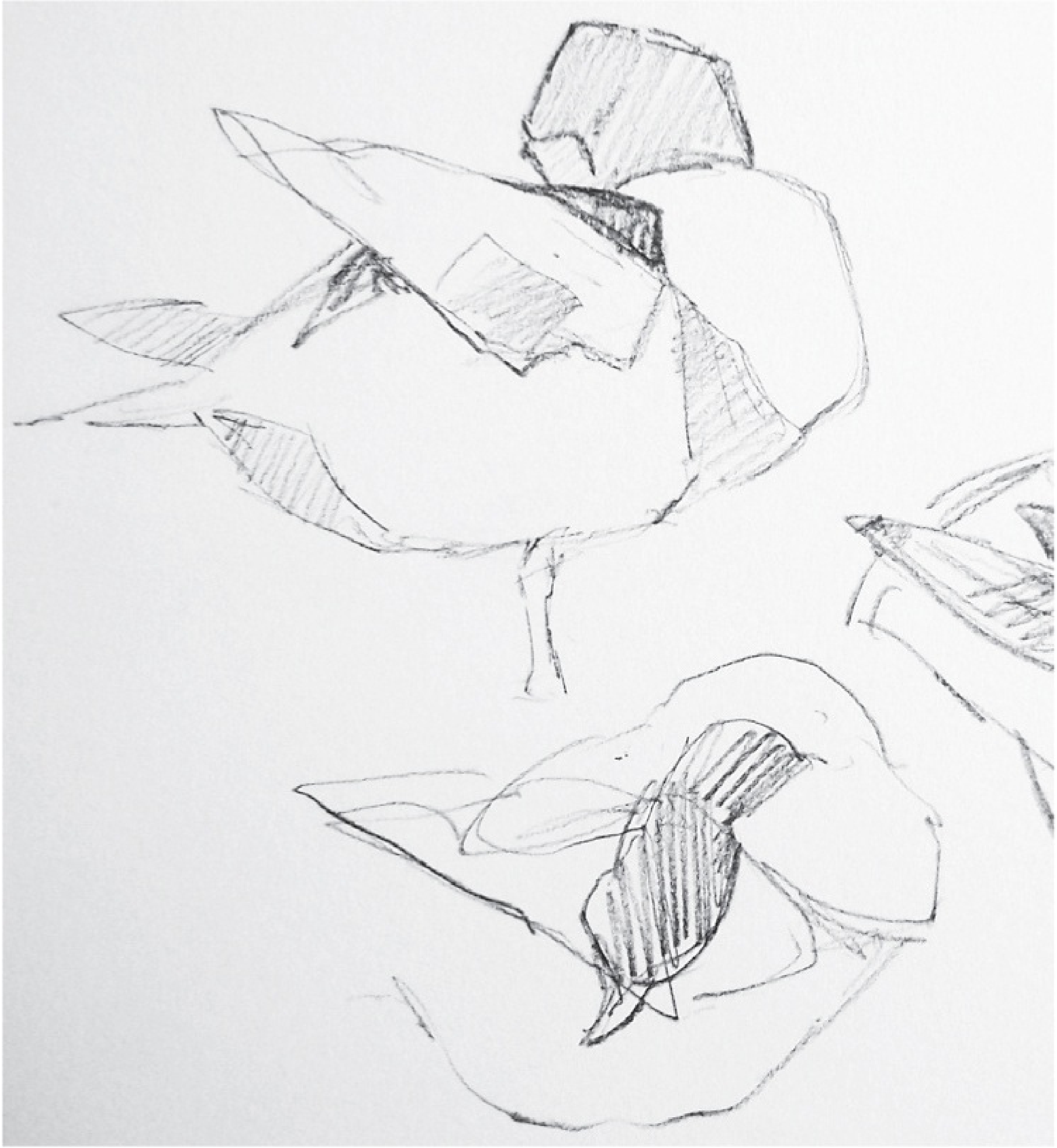
Birds, when stretching one wing, will also stretch the sameside leg at the same time. When drawing birds in action it is a good idea to concentrate on the parts of the body that are in motion. When they are preening, draw the neck angles, the eye positions and how they relax a wing. The general body shape can be sketched in afterwards. Most importantly however, remember the birds need the higher ground for roosting when the tide covers their feeding grounds and this is an important time for rest and grooming – excellent potential for study for the artist, but also a time when they can be easily disturbed. Make certain you are not causing unnecessary disturbance and avoid preventing the birds going about their routines. The birds come first.

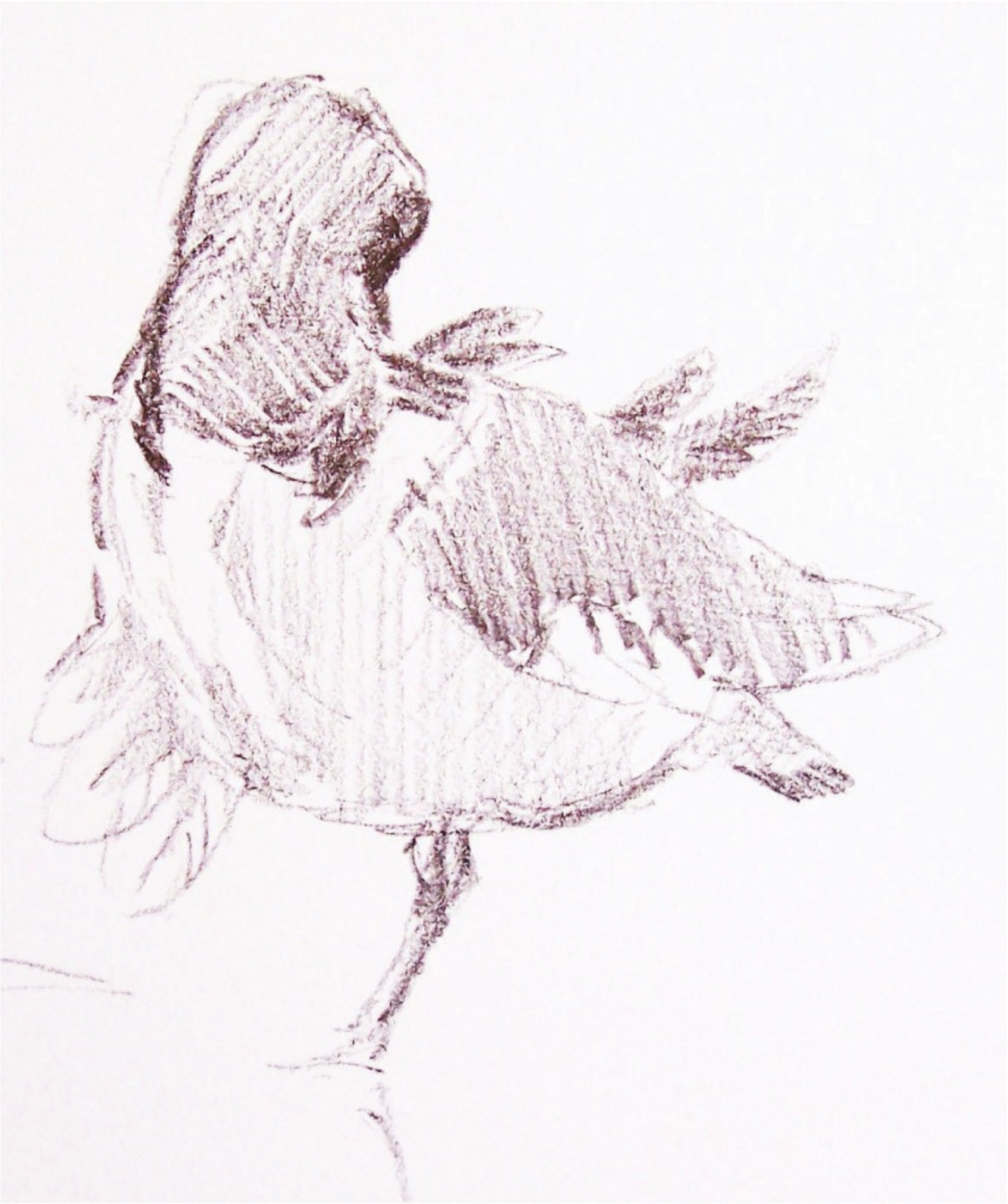
Working outdoors from life presents challenges not usually present in the studio: variable light, movement, temperature and the artist's comfort are very real issues. And if your chosen subject happens to be a bird, then you have a constantly moving and often disappearing one. 'Fieldcraft' is a term to describe the skill of achieving and maintaining close views of wildlife whilst minimizing disturbance of the subject. Fieldcraft is important so we don't cause the bird any unnecessary stress; this also means the bird behaves naturally – just how we would wish to portray it. However, some species at certain times are very easy to approach. As noted above, seabird cliffs offer wonderful opportunities to get up close to the action, with very little fear of disturbing the occupants. Some species of birds are more difficult to observe than others, and many birds will become quite secretive at the nest-site. When approaching a bird which you have glimpsed, it may seem natural to attempt to creep up on it, but this is not always the best strategy as it is certain to have already spotted you and by stalking your quarry you are likely to make it flee – after all, it has no idea of your artistic intentions and you have adopted a hunting attitude. It is often the best plan to move directly but quietly to a vantage position not too close to the bird and settle down, unpack the basic gear required and proceed with your work.



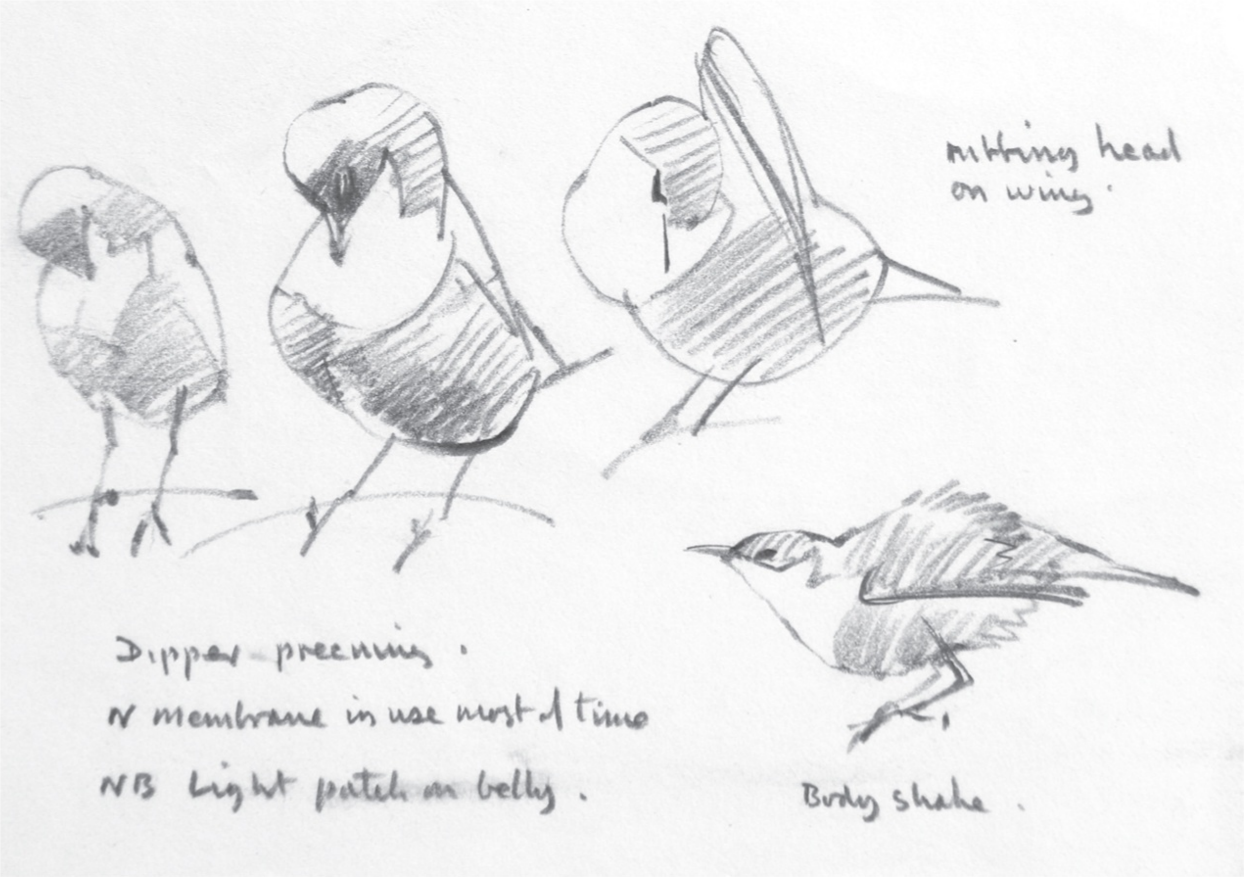
Redshanks are wary birds and act as the alarm of the estuary.



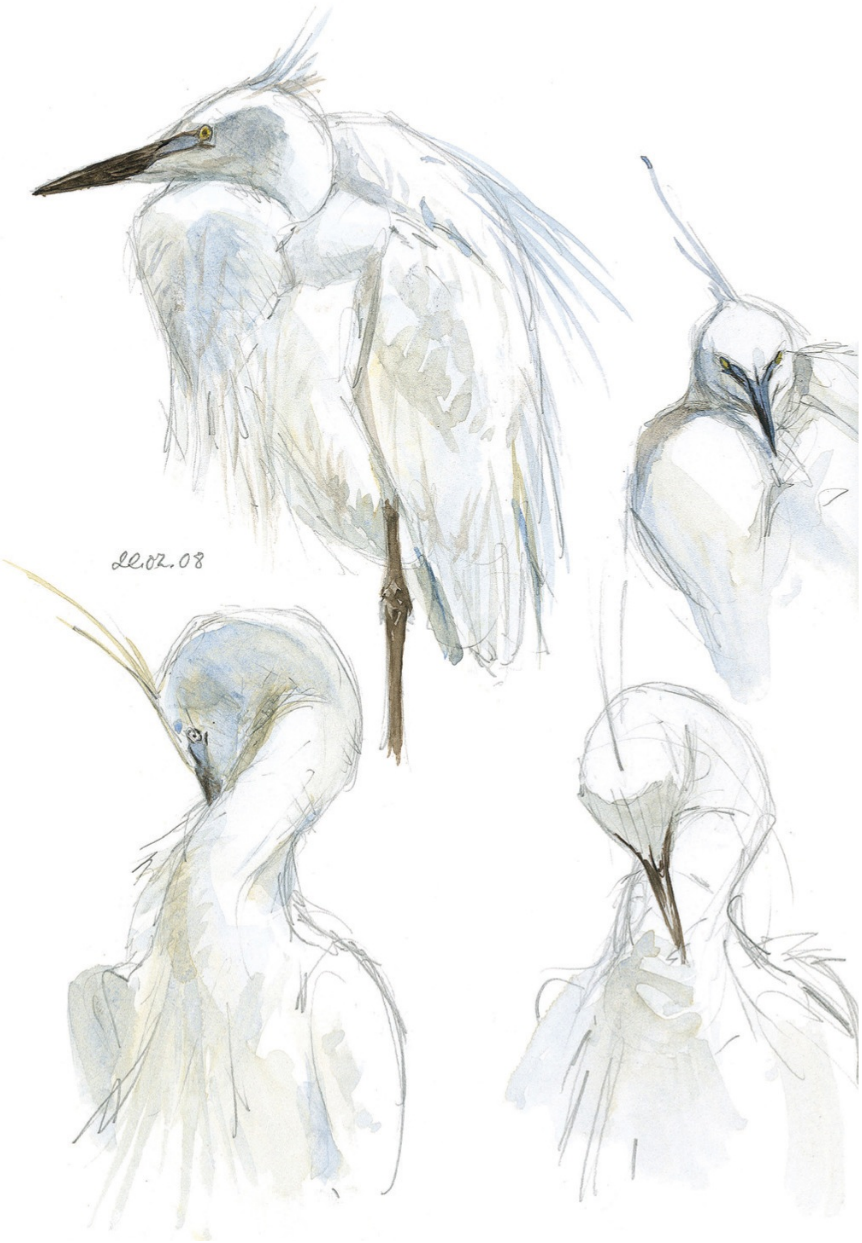




Tim Wootton: preening shelduck and an oystercatcher trying to control its balance (and its feathers) in a stiff breeze.

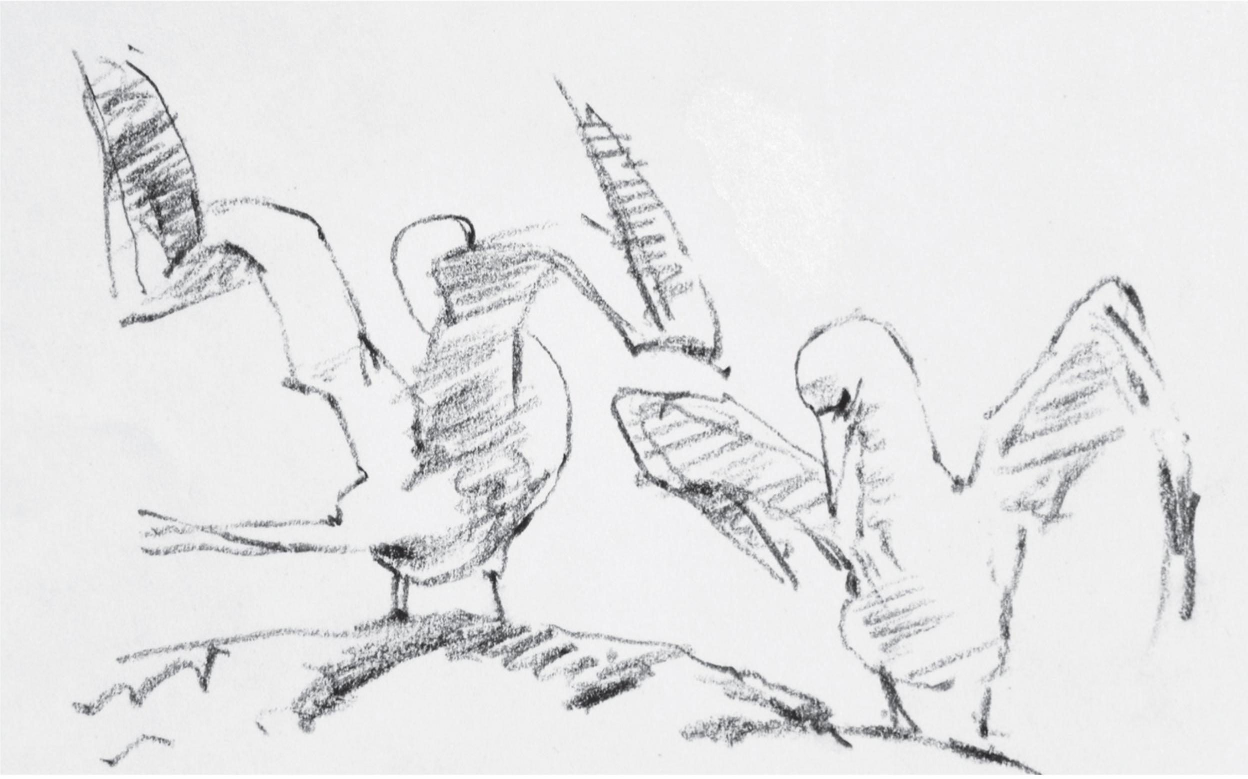

rubbing head on wing.
Dipper preening.
N membrane in use most of time
NB Light patch on belly.
Body shake.

John Busby: dipper preening and shaking itself dry following a bath.

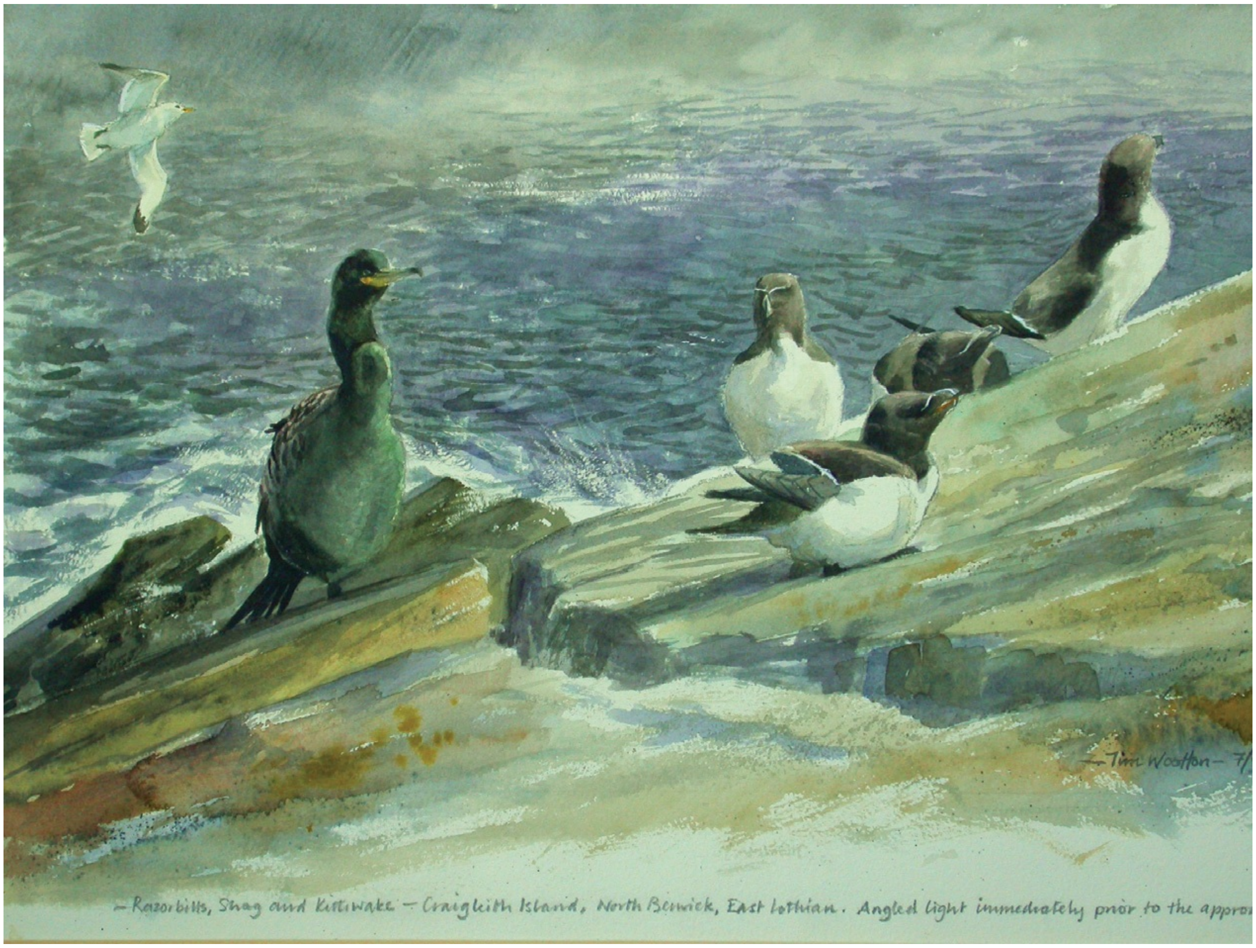


22.02.08

Juan Varela: egrets. (First published in *Entre Mar y Tierra/Between Sea and Land*, Lynx Edicions, Barcelona.)



John Busby: gannets displaying.


– Tim Wootton – 7/
– Razorbills, Shag and Kittiwake – Craigleith Island, North Berwick, East Lothian. Angled light immediately prior to the appro

Tim Wootton: shag and razorbills, Craigleith Island.

Your choice of clothing should be taken into consideration. Firstly it should keep you warm, dry and as comfortable as possible. The second consideration, depending on where you will be working, is the aspect of colour. Typical outdoor clothing tends towards greens and browns and camouflage designs. It is a good idea to keep colours low-key to avoid alarming wildlife unnecessarily. This is certainly true of woodland or moorland environments in any case. If you are at the coast however – a seabird colony or a boat trip – then the priority is safety, so brighter colours may be the choice (indeed with regard to boats, you will certainly need a brightly coloured life-jacket on).

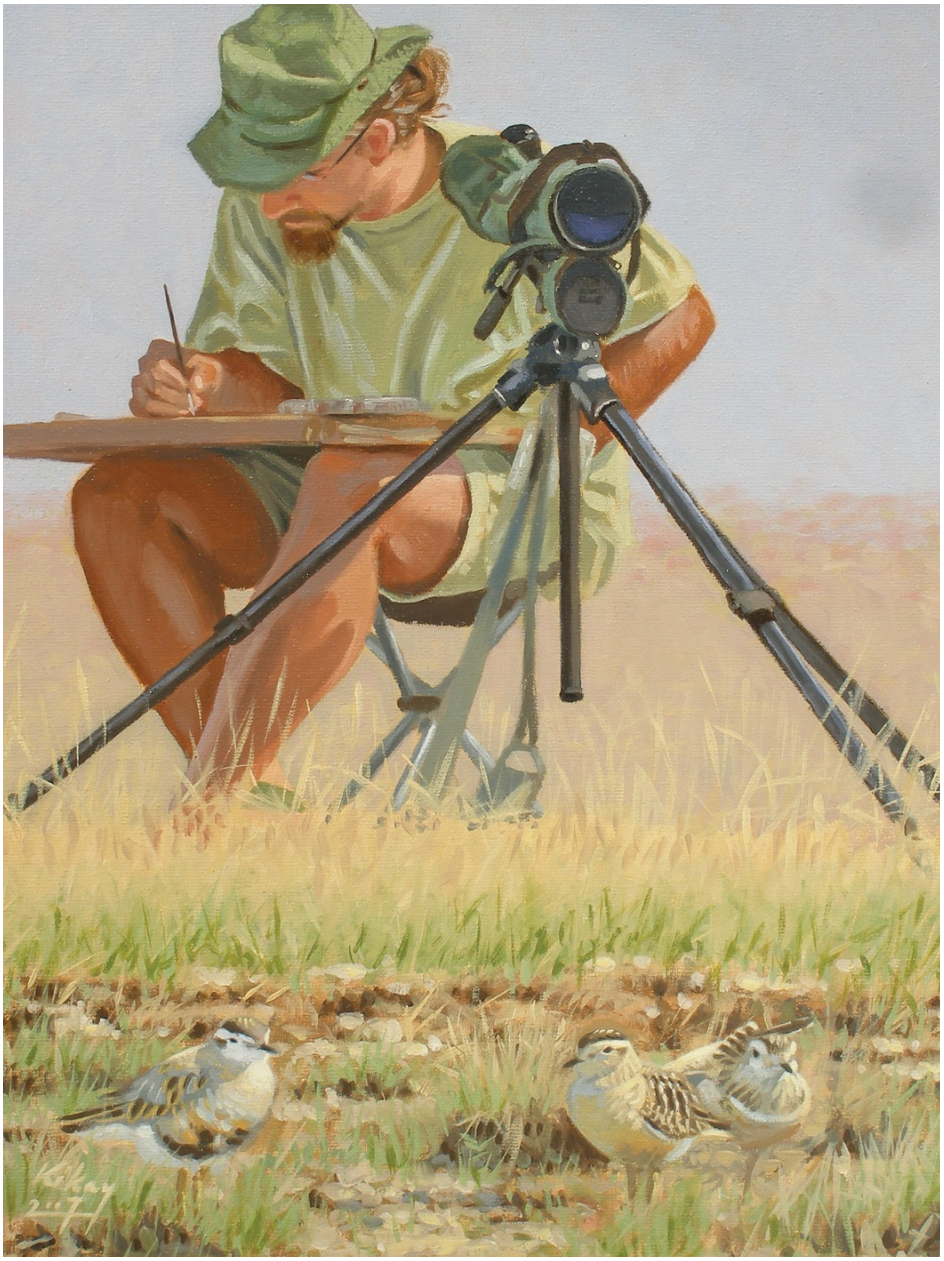
Besides your preferred sketching kit, you will also need to consider whether optical aids may be useful. In bygone days, naturalists would just as often resort to the shotgun to record their finds or as an aid to identification. Nowadays however, there is a plethora of optical equipment available, specifically designed for nature study; such drastic measures as the gun are dispensable, besides being illegal in most cases. The range of equipment available is quite vast but for observing birds with the purpose of drawing them you should consider owning either a pair of binoculars or a ‘spotting scope’ (a terrestrial telescope specifically designed and engineered for observing the natural world) as opposed to an astronomical telescope, which usually presents an inverted image.

Binoculars are the single item of technology no birdwatcher would be without and there is a wide array of brands and magnifications. For a useful, all-purpose binocular choose something such as an 8 × 30; where ‘8’ is the magnification and the ‘30’ is the object lens diameter (30mm). More powerful models are to be had but they will cost more and may be significantly heavier – something to consider if you are trying to use them one-handed whilst sketching. Pocket-sized compact binoculars can be useful in woodland scenarios where birds are only likely to be visible at close quarters and you may need to follow a moving bird as it flits from twig to twig. Large, powerful binoculars come into their own when watching birds at great distances – on estuaries or whilst sea-watching for example. Some of the weightier types have the potential to be fixed to a tripod for stability (and to save the arm muscles).

The spotting scope has become a significantly more important piece of apparatus for the serious birdwatcher, and again the range is huge. There are two distinct styles that you need to be aware of, the difference being in the angle of the eyepiece (the lens through which you look). There are straightthrough and there are angled eyepiece telescopes, which are used in conjunction with a stabilizing support, usually a tripod. Traditionally telescopes were of the straight type and their basic design has been little changed for hundreds of years. They are relatively simple to line up with the target and following the action is straightforward as all the focusing is in a direct line. Spotting scopes with an angled eyepiece are a little trickier to aim and the user has to get used to how to ‘pan’ the scope (panning is the transverse sweeping movement of the telescope used when tracking something or scanning a vista).

For the wildlife artist, the angled eyepiece type of spotting scope has become extremely popular. If you have your sketchbook on your knee the movement required to flick from looking down into the eyepiece to looking down onto the paper is minimal as both are directly in your line of sight. The less time it takes between looking at the subject and making a mark on the paper, the more information your brain will retain as you make your mark.

'In the field' is a term we use when we work outdoors. As noted in Chapter 5, the artist needs to plan well ahead and be well organized to make the best of this method. Although it is not necessary to take a mobile studio with you, you will need to have a basic kit which you can use to produce meaningful work. The materials you take into the field will depend on the amount of time available for the excursion and the type of work you hope to produce; will you be mainly drawing on paper or do you hope to produce work in colour, and if so, onto what type of support (paper, canvas, board, card)? Painting and drawing in watercolour is a practical and immediate way of introducing colour into your work and outdoor sketching boxes, or fieldboxes, are available from many art suppliers. Coloured pencils are easy to carry whereas painting in acrylics or oils will mean you have to take various peripheral items to supplement your kit.



Szabolcs Kokay: *Marci Sketching*.

A basic *plein-air* kit might comprise cartridge paper (either loose leaf or sketchbook), a watercolour fieldbox with halfpans, three brushes (a large flat, a size 8 and a size 4), 4B pencil and sharpener and a screw-top jar containing water. Large bulldog clips or elastic bands can be very useful for holding sheets of paper in place if it gets breezy.

REFERENCE MATERIAL : WHERE TO FIND IT

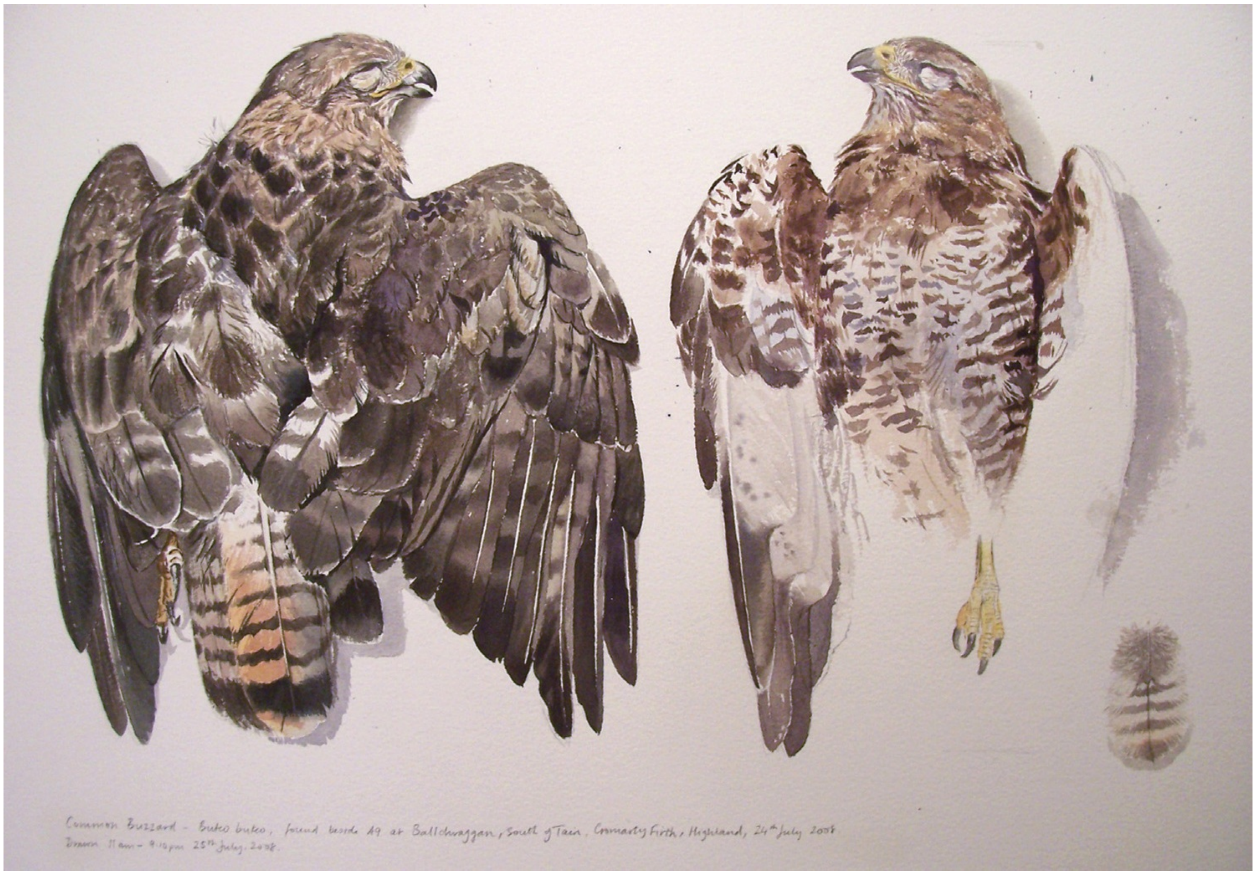
REFERENCE MATERIAL: WHERE TO FIND IT AND WHERE TO COLLECT IT

Resources for the wildlife artist are available from many sources: from aviaries, wildfowl collections and museums, to books, magazines, television and the Internet. However, the primary resource and, for many, the inspiration to draw and paint is the great outdoors.

From skins

Mounted specimens can be an invaluable reference and most local museums will have at least a rudimentary collection for study, albeit through the glass of a display case, or tucked away in a drawer. Being able to handle a specimen (alive or recently dead) reveals much about the anatomy and structure of the bird; where the hard bits of bone lie close to the surface of the skin and how features such as beaks and legs emerge from the concealing groups of feathers.

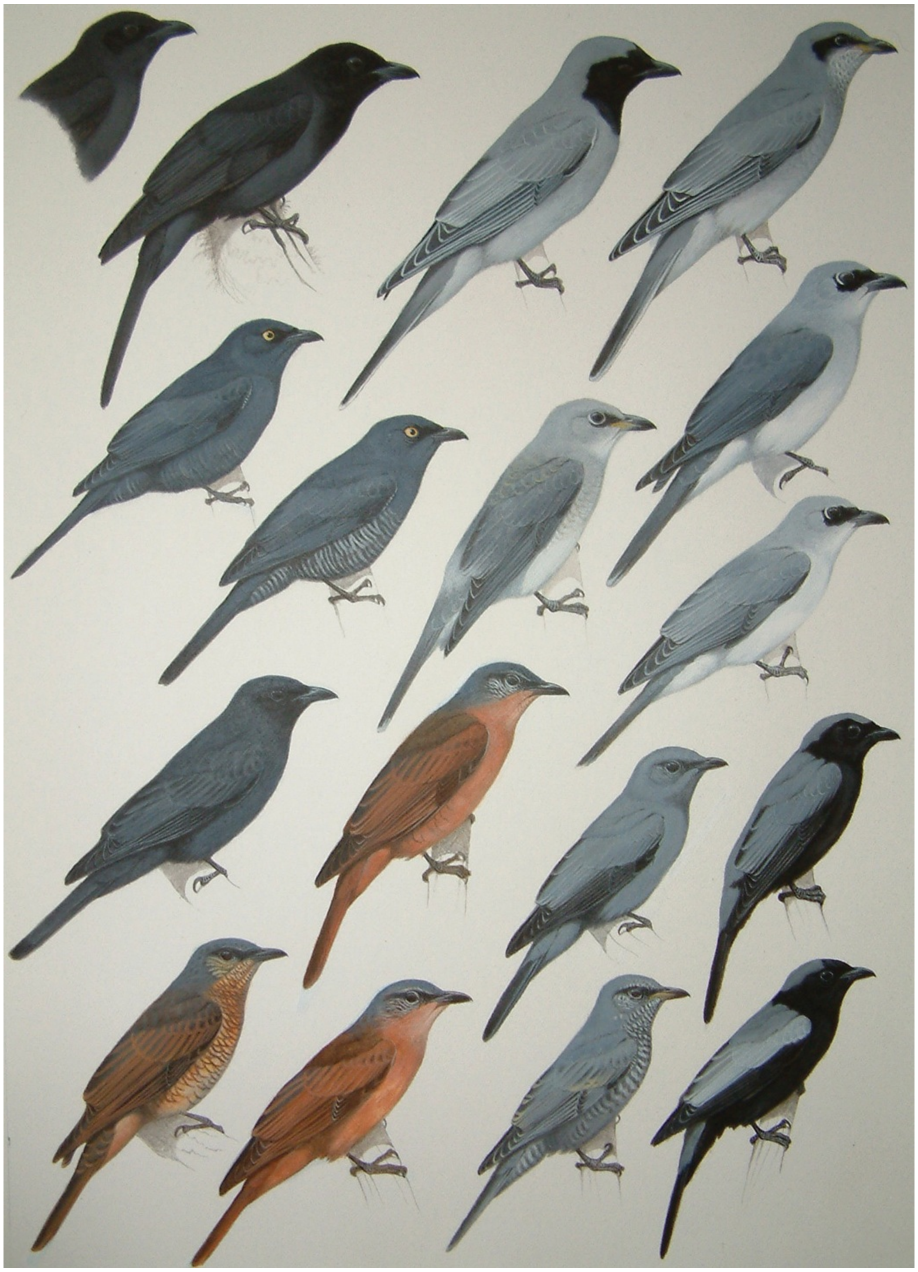
Making use of dead specimens should be considered essential preparatory work and unfortunately road casualties are not uncommon. Gruesome though it may seem at first, don't neglect the chance to study freshly killed birds. Only by first-hand contact can the artist start to appreciate, for instance, the way a wing opens and closes, among other fine points of the bird. Taxidermy specimens offer an opportunity to check plumage details but they should not necessarily be accepted as being accurate representations of the living bird. Although there are fine examples of realistically mounted subjects, often they are out of proportion and bear little resemblance to the living thing (this is particularly true of older specimens). Unless you are confident of your own ability to interpret a mounted bird, they are best left in the museum. Freshly dead specimens, on the other hand, retain much of the essence of the bird as it was in life; the colour of feathers and skin will be authentic and, assuming the creature didn't suffer disfigurement, the anatomy will be in proportion and can be relied upon. You will find that the scientific and artistic investigation required in making faithful studies from the dead bird brings its own energy and you will soon be able to set aside the squeamish side to the practice. Occasionally a spray of air freshener may be required for specimens that have gone a little ‘over the top', and remember to keep hands and surfaces clean and disinfected.


Common Buzzard - Buteo buteo, found beside A9 at Balldwaggan, South of Tain, Cromarty Firth, Highland, 24th July 2008
Drawn 11am - 9.10pm 25th July. 2008.

Tim Wootton: a life-sized pencil and watercolour study of a road-kill common buzzard (*Buteo buteo*).

When you get the opportunity to handle a freshly dead bird look at how the wings open and close, fan the bird's tail to show the order of the feathers and feel over the body to see where the bones come close to the surface. These are the areas which you will sense when you work from the living animal.

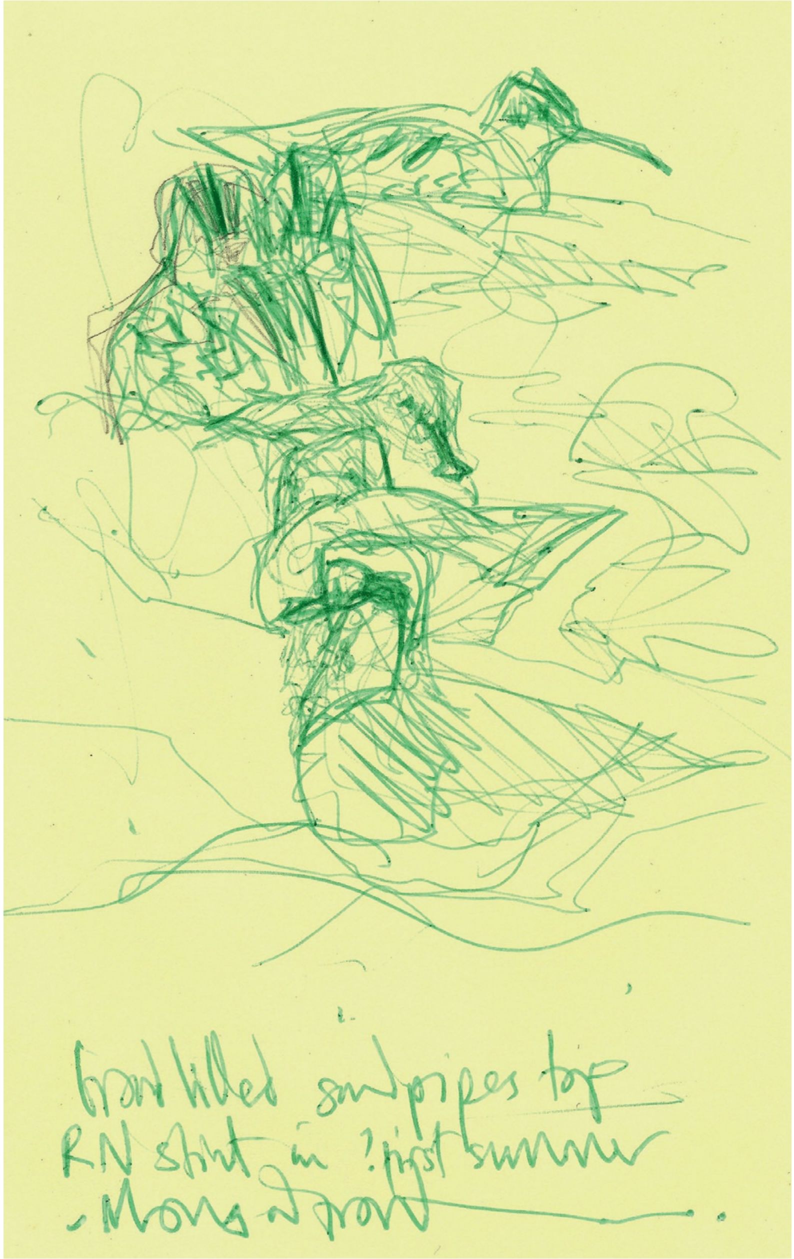
When setting up for drawing, it may be helpful to place the bird on a separate board so that it can be removed quickly if necessary and use pins or sticky tape to keep the wings partially open and in place. Try to be faithful to the purpose of the study; check plumage details and aim to render them accurately. Avoid the temptation to resurrect the creature on the page; make the study be of a dead specimen and treat it with the decorum that it deserves.



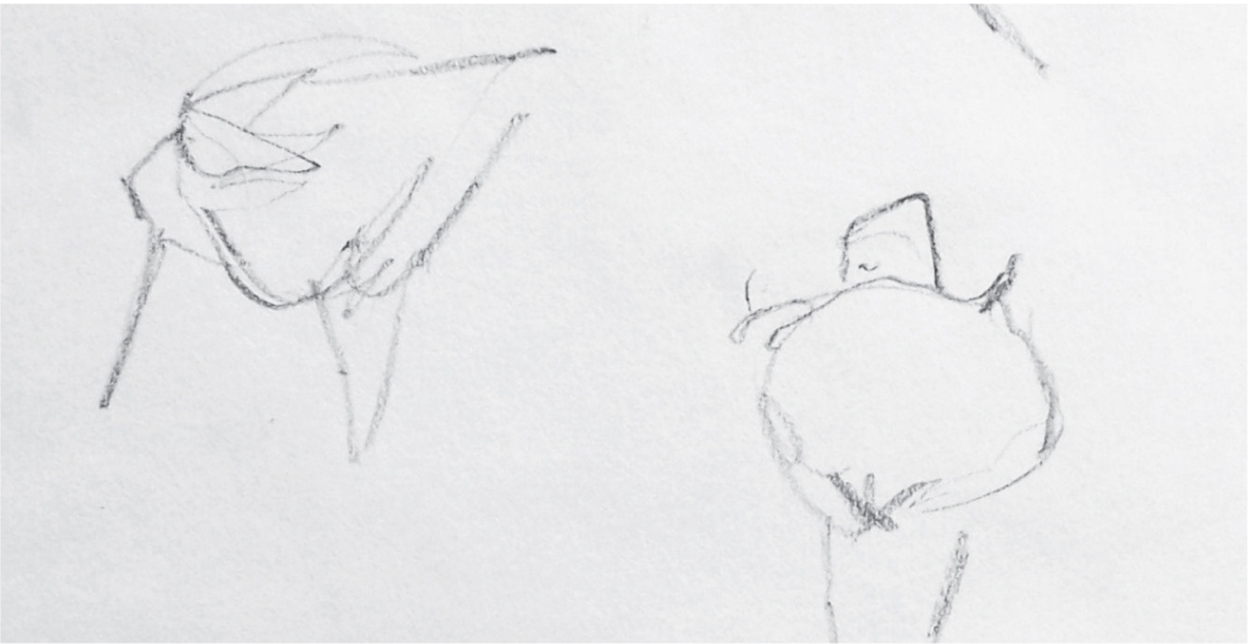
Adam Bowley: Melanesia cuckoo-shrikes. An identification plate derived from photographs, study in the field and reference to museum skins. Skins and mounted specimens are essential reference when accuracy of plumage and scale are important; individual variation has to be considered therefore as many individuals of the same species should be studied in order to form the image of the 'norm' of each species. This is painstaking work, requiring both artistic skill and technical diligence.

DRAWING FROM LIFE: INTRODUCING MOVEMENT

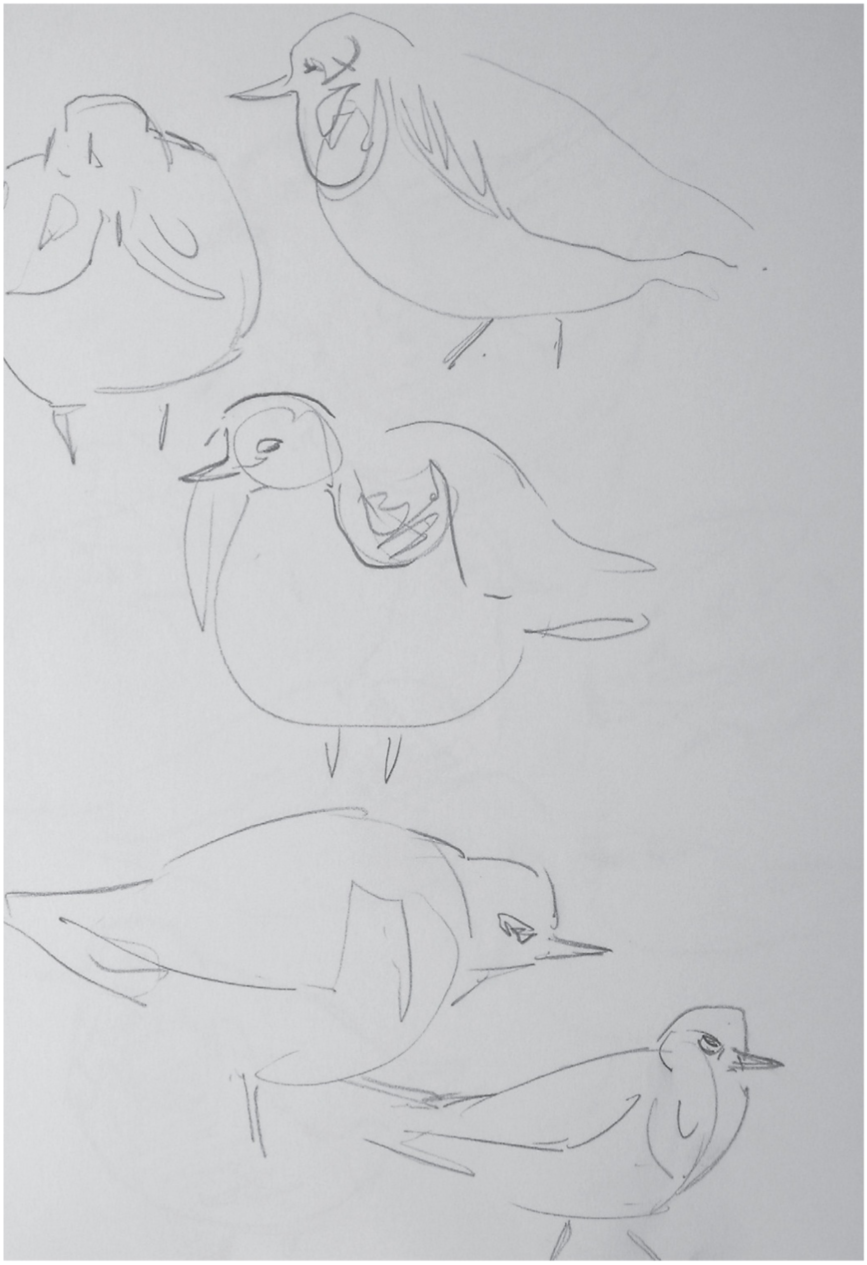
Having successfully located your subject you now have to get something of the experience down on paper. Before making any attempt at drawing, it is a good idea to sit quietly for a few minutes and absorb the scene before you. Which birds are doing what? Is there any interesting behaviour or interaction happening? Are there any naturally pleasing compositions of birds and habitat worth investigating?


Broad billed sandpipes top
RN stint in ?first summer
Mong n front

Ed Keeble: Asian sandpipers. Energetic marks searching for the form of the individual birds and general composition of the group; an instantaneous response to the scene, drawn using whatever is to hand, in this case green biro.



Tim Wootton: bar-tailed godwit and curlew. Thumbnail sketches of a feeding godwit and a resting curlew drawn through a telescope.



Nick Derry: turnstones. Directly observed from the living birds, the artist barely took his eye off the action, resulting in these automatic drawings, which are probing, dynamic, and unadulterated by excessive fussiness or superficial detail.

The first few marks on the paper may not result in much, but they are nevertheless important. The white paper can be very daunting indeed and anything you do to break that tension will ease your way into the session ahead. Do a little warm-up exercise (as described in Chapter 2), perhaps make a few written notes about the climate and species in view – anything to get the mechanics of the pencil working over the paper. It is normal and understandable that the first scribbles will be sketchy and incomplete; the extent will depend a great deal on when you last worked in this way and the circumstances under which you are operating. However, as the session progresses your work will develop as your confidence increases and your hand and arm loosen up. Make drawings anywhere over the page and when you need to turn a leaf, keep the momentum going. Try to avoid resting after a sheet of drawings or the same barrier will build with the blank sheet. Draw what you can see well and don't worry about the bird moving – they do that all the time – just start another drawing.

The best advice about drawing birds is to do it all the time. Get into the habit of always taking a small sketchbook with you and use it constantly. Draw anything just to keep up the momentum, then when an opportunity presents itself, you won't have hang-ups ('this is my quarry – I must make this drawing a good one'). Inevitably, if you go out with the intention of making 'good' drawings, the self-induced pressure to perform will likely stifle the energy and creativity necessary to make fresh and interesting marks on the paper, the combination of which are contributory elements in any good drawing.

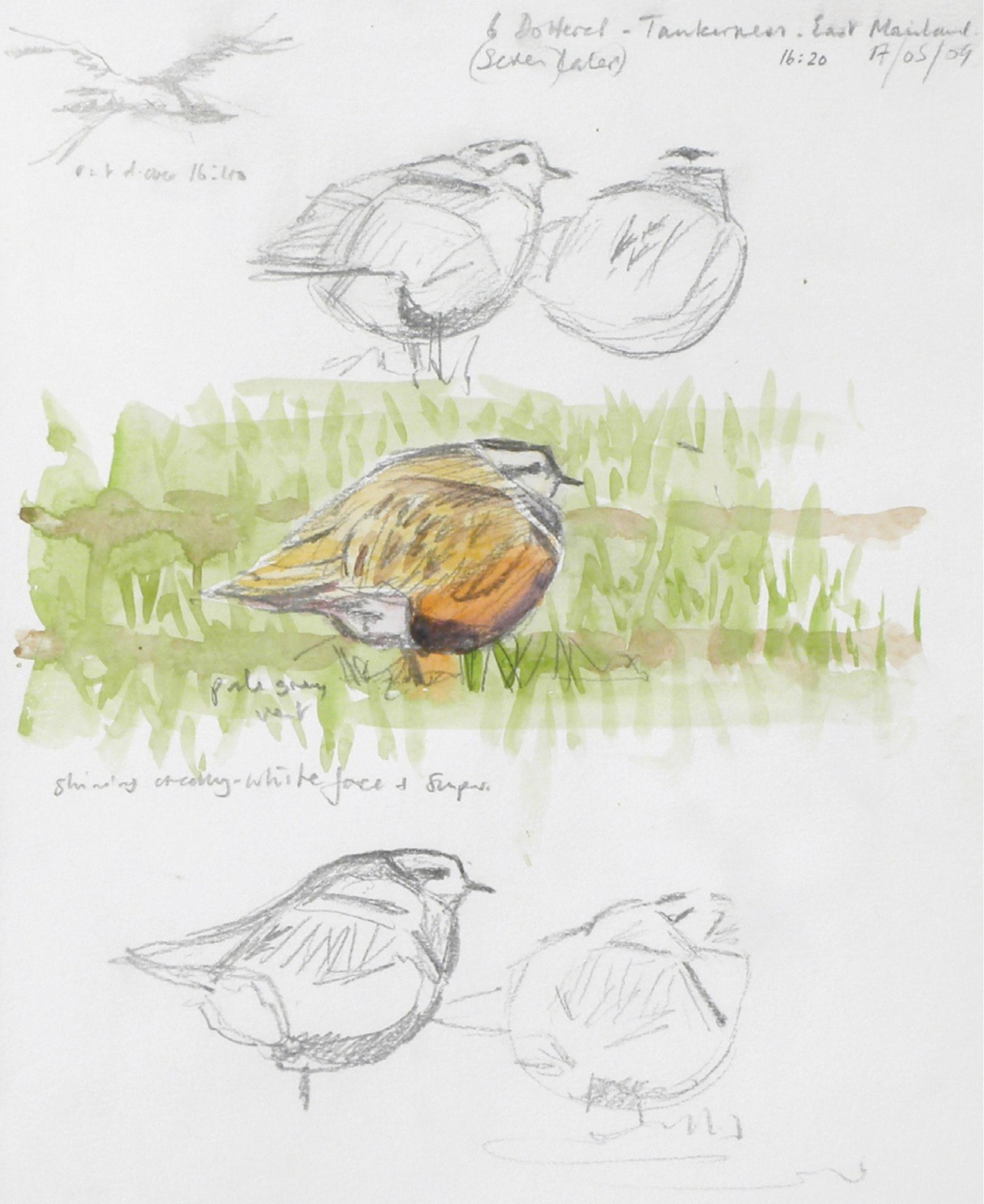
Preliminary sketches may be little more than a few lines, an attempt to catch a fleeting moment of behaviour or movement. In this case it's important to allow your drawing to respond to the activity that has caught your eye; rarely will you be able to see many details so concentrate more on gesture and include written notes about what you can see. Don't worry what they look like – just do it!

When it comes to drawing birds from life, two questions regularly surface: how much of it is visual memory and familiarity with the species, and how much is direct observation of a particular pose? The answer is probably a bit of both, but depending on the species and how well you can see them will alter the balance somewhat.

Try to approach the subject thinking it will stay around for some time, but also be aware that the likelihood is the opposite. Quick and loose sketches are the best way to start a session, but the 'looking' time should be used to full benefit.

I'll use a couple of examples from my own sketchbook to illustrate the point.

For instance, when drawing a species such as the dotterel, it’s a bird I really hadn’t seen very much at all so I spent quite a lot of time just looking at the bird through the scope. I tried to work out how the plumage fits over the body and which topographical marks relate to what bits of anatomy (the breast band almost perfectly delineates where the upper breast tracts join the lower breast and flank tracts, and the buff cheek marks flow from the eyestripe). The supercilia meet at the back of the head, curtailing the dark crown which becomes a ‘cap’. The white under-tail and ventral area is in distinct contrast with the black lower belly.

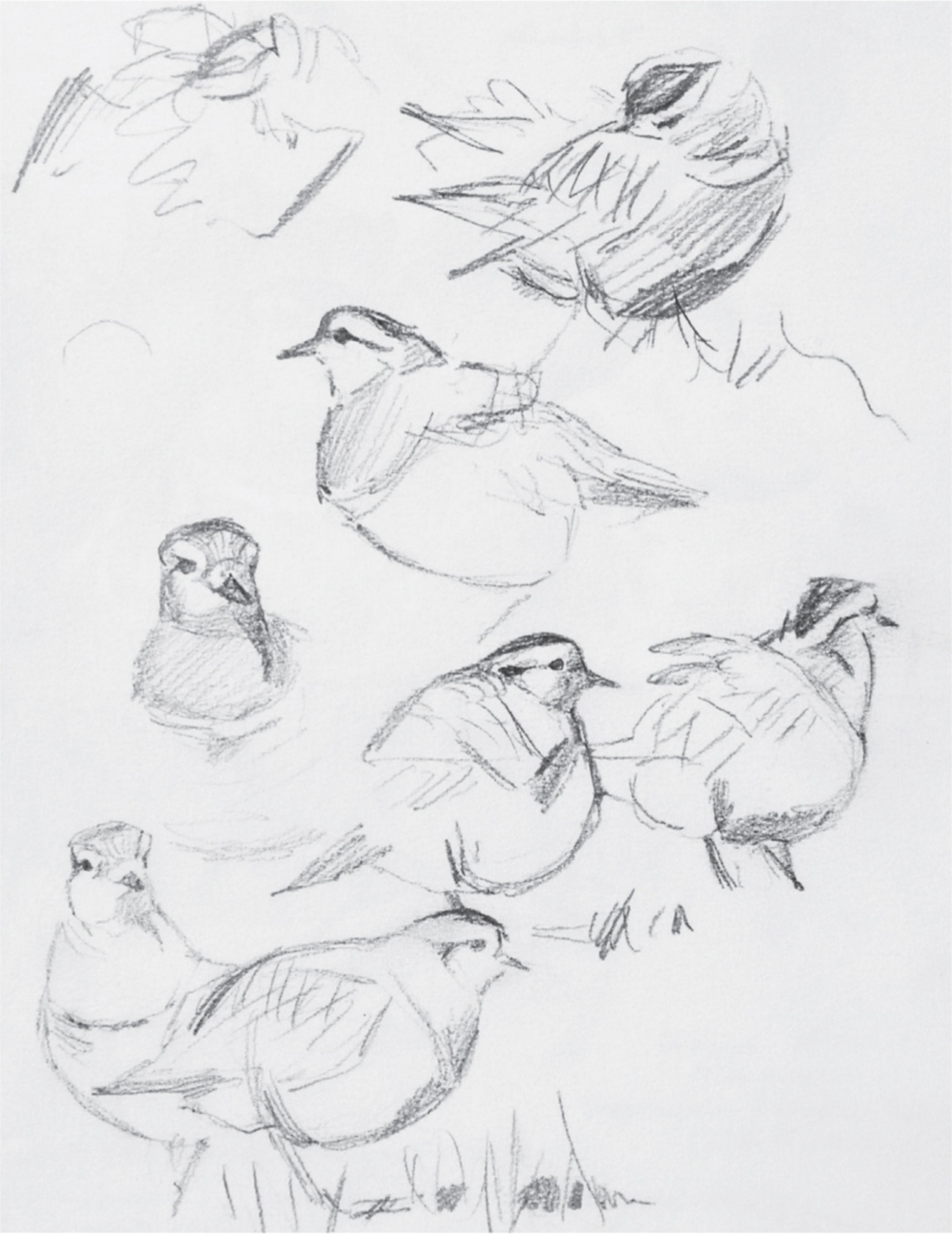


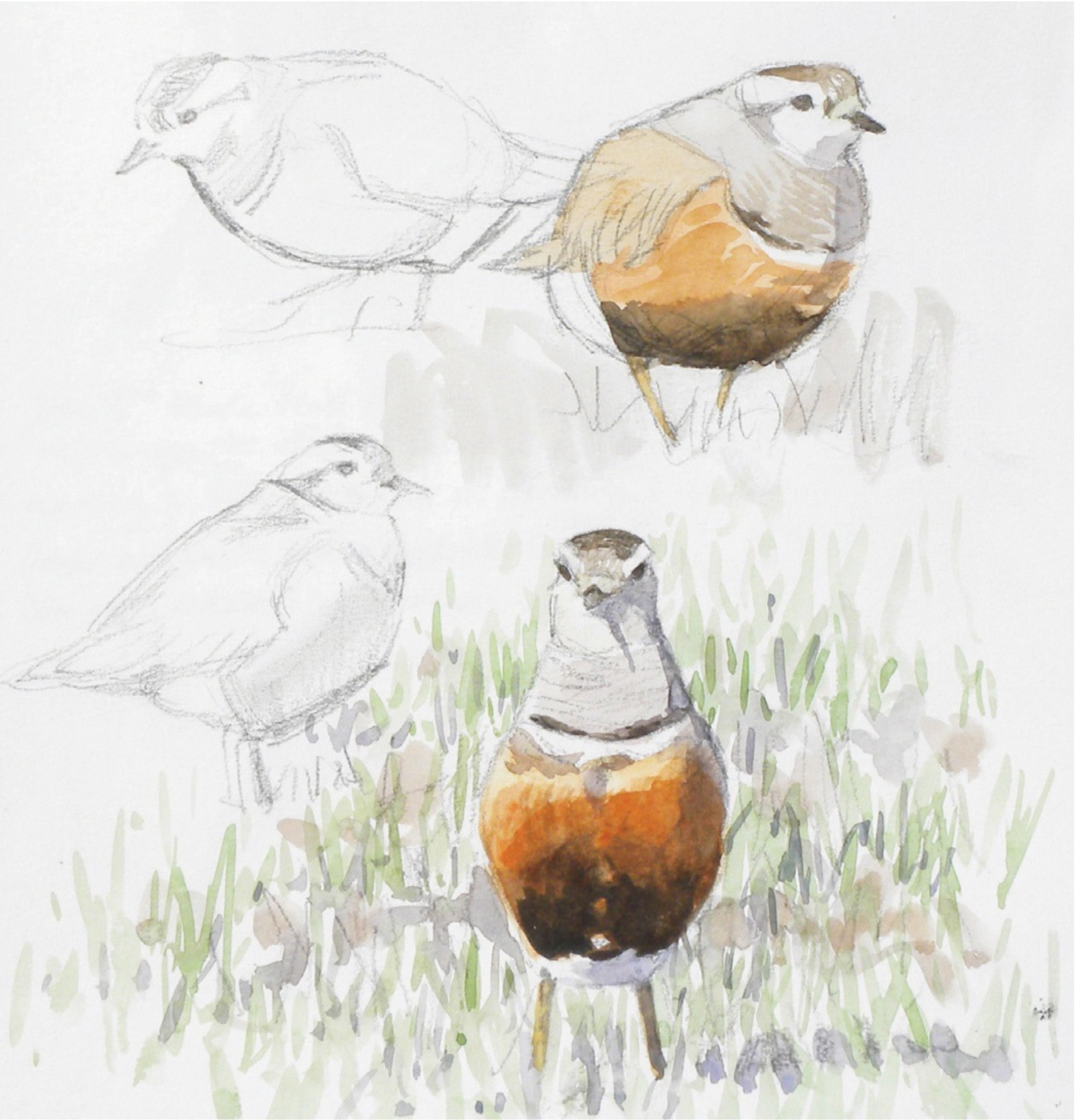
6 Dotterel - Tankerness. East Mainland.
(Seen later) 16:20 17/05/09

out d-over 16:40

pale grey vent

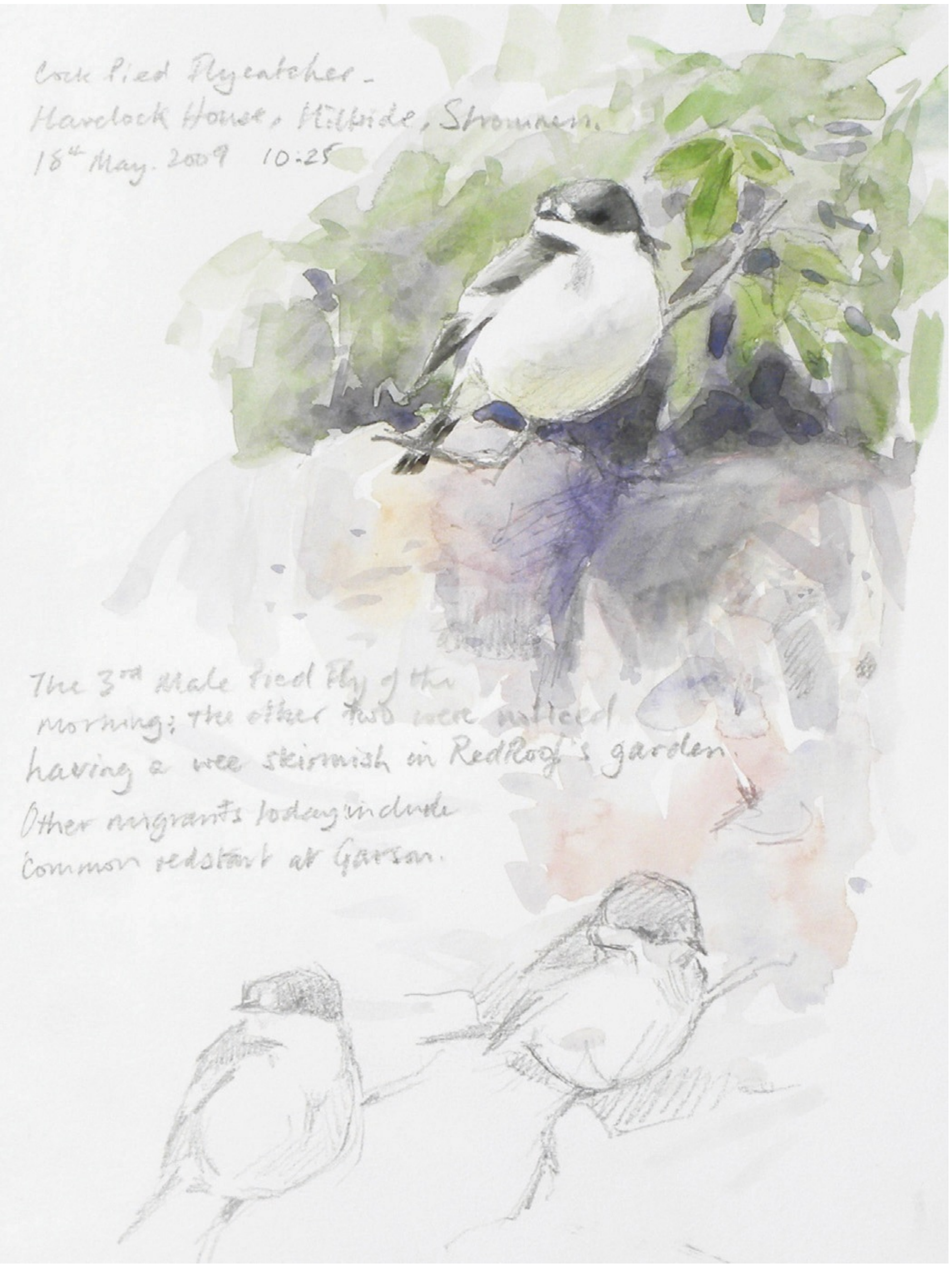
shining creamy-white face + supers.





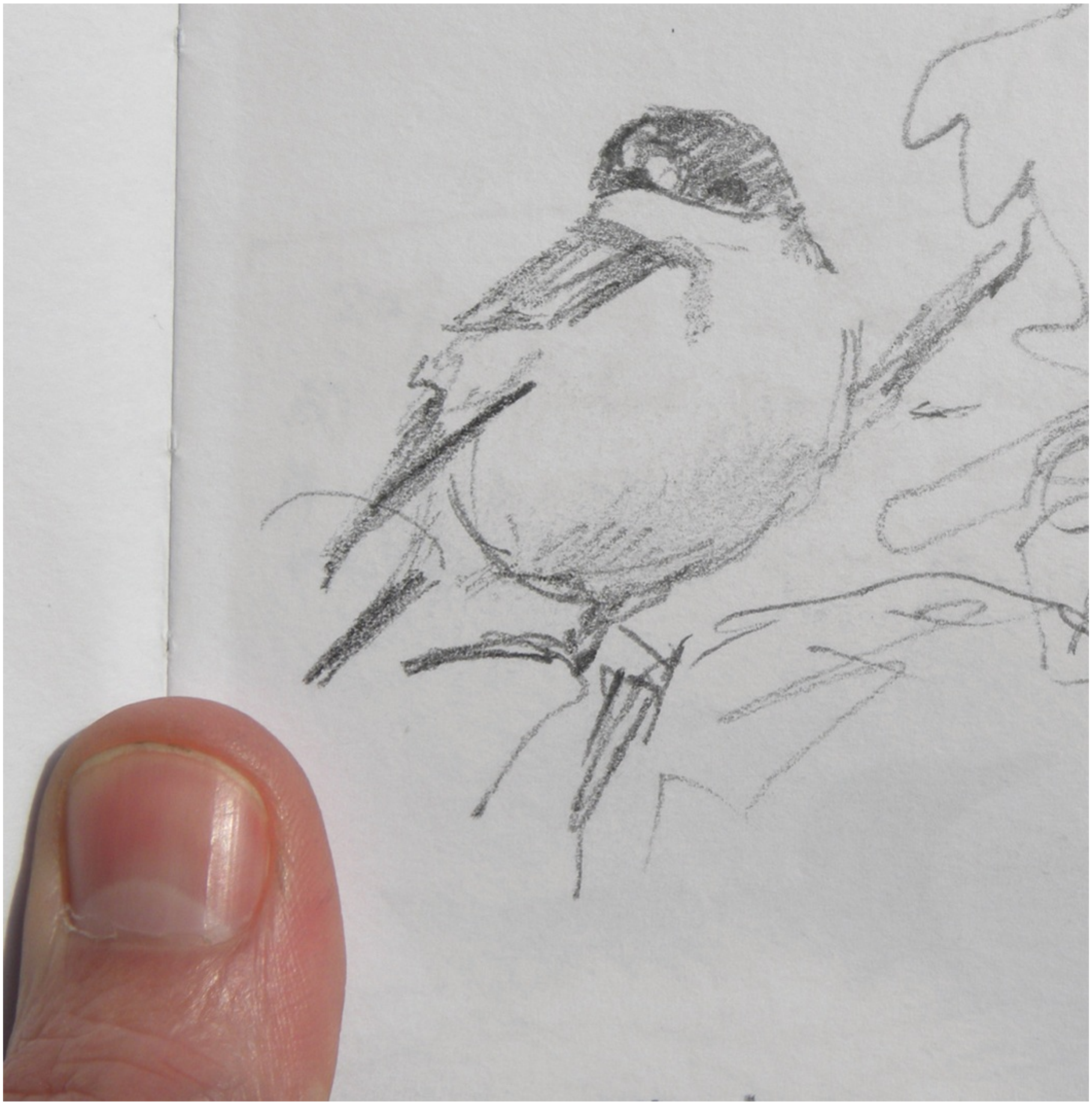
Tim Wootton: dotterels.

Look now at the first sheet of sketches and notice the drawings are quite tentatively trying to work out how the surface patterns fit over the bird's structure. The next couple of sheets investigate these aspects in greater detail and also aim to catch some of the character of the bird. These were all done on site, through the scope – colour was added there and then, with the subjects in front of me.



Cock Pied Flycatcher -
Havelock House, Hillside, Stromness.
18th May. 2009 10:25

The 3rd Male Pied Fly of the
morning: the other two were noticed
having a wee skirmish in RedRoof's garden.
Other migrants today include
common redstart at Garson.



Tim Wootton: sketches of a pied flycatcher.

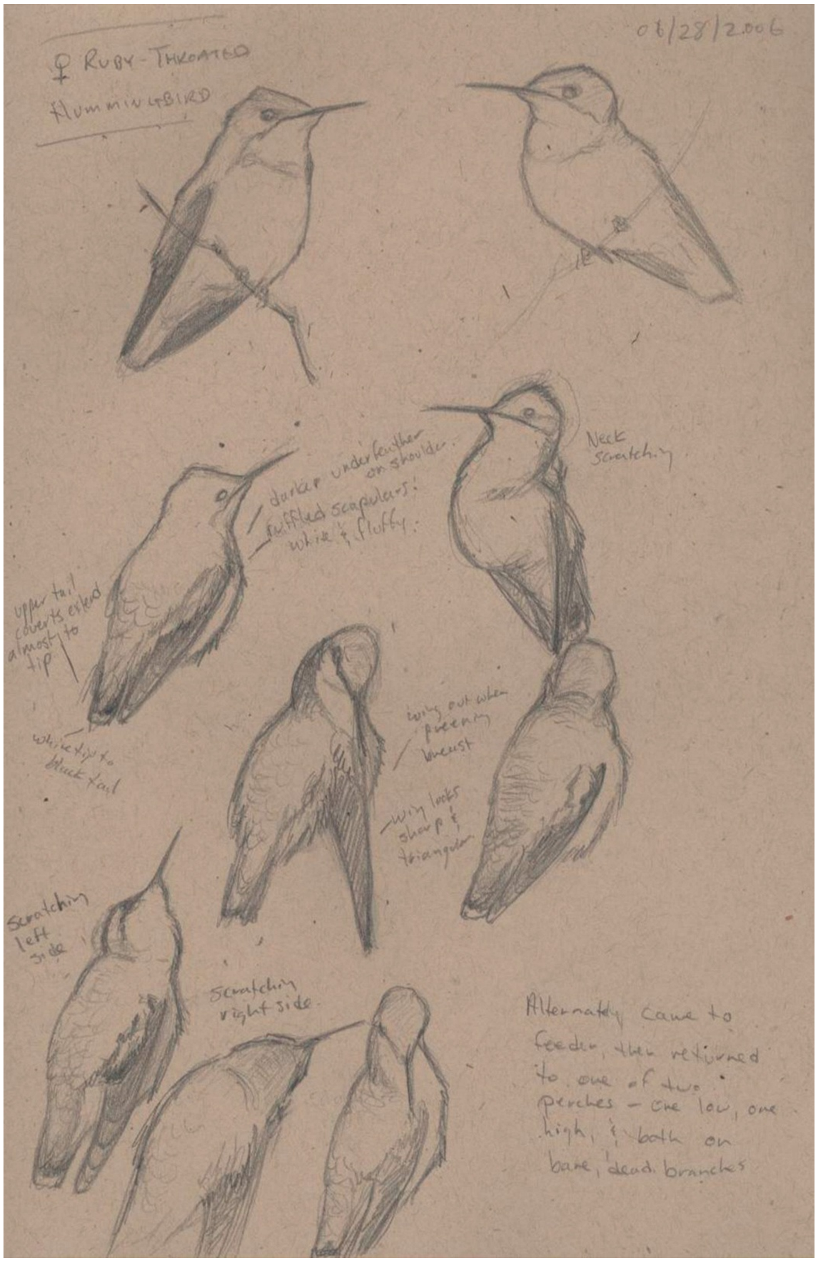
The pied flycatcher was a slightly different process. The original drawing was done with the bird in front of me, using my binoculars and a tiny A6 sketchbook. As before, although it was a small passerine in a wooded garden environment and I knew I had little time, I still managed to have a really good look at the bird first. The drawing is in soft pencil. I then took this little sketch straight to the studio and redrew it into another sketchbook. I put the colour on whilst the memory was clear in my mind (although there is always an element of interpretation when it comes to colour – there being no ‘absolute’).

By taking the time to look first I noticed that the bird kept its body pretty much in the same position as it was perched, the only real change in pose coming as it rotated its head from side to side. So I waited until it moved into a ¾ portrait position, looked at the proportions really closely and, as soon as it moved again, committed some marks to the paper. I then looked up again, waited for it to resume the pose, and checked the drawing against the bird.

It stayed in the same spot for about three minutes, during two of which I was looking at the bird intently. The overall drawing time was probably fifteen seconds.

Here are Nick Derry’s thoughts on the process:

> Approaches to sketches are pretty much dependent on the conditions at the time – weather and distance will influence how much you can see and what materials you can use. An unfamiliar bird will require a lot of looking before putting pencil to paper, but even a familiar bird should be observed with fresh eyes each time. Drawing what you see is a lot better than drawing what you know or think is there.
>
> Familiarity with birds does help though. Knowing what a gull’s bill should look like when foreshortened does help in drawing it, you just need to check quickly that all is as expected and then draw it. A good sketch takes a lot longer in the looking than in the drawing. The drawing takes only as long as the time needed to move the pencil from one side of the bird to the other.
>
> It’s not about being speedy and sloppy, it’s about having a strong mental image of what you’re going to draw, drawing it immediately, and then stopping – adding later if there is more to add, but not fiddling if you’re unsure.

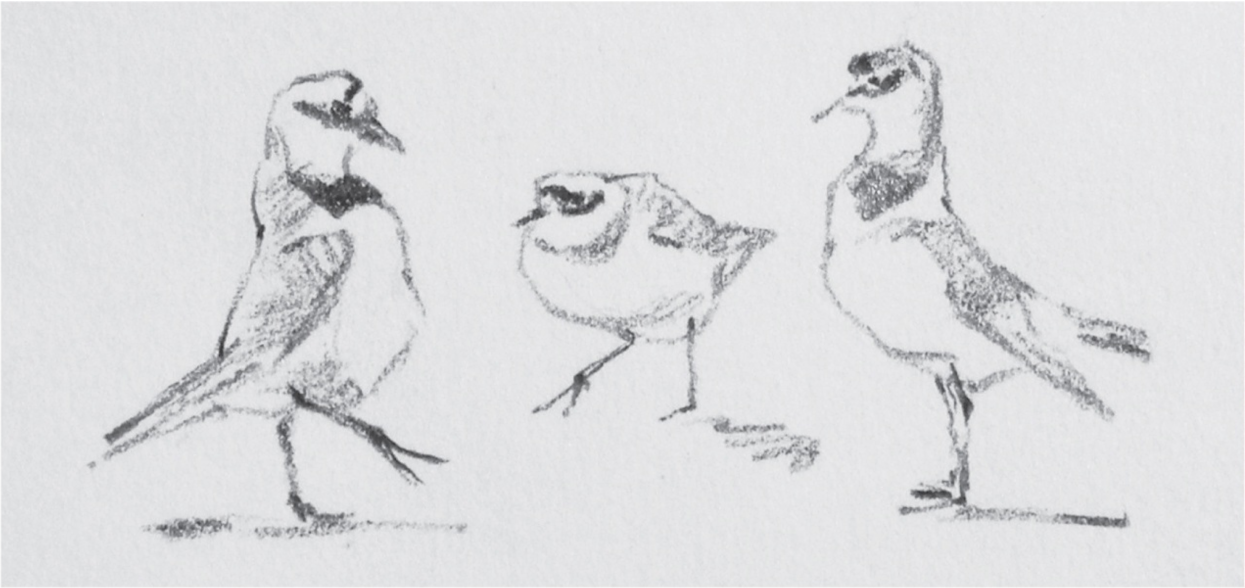

♀ RUBY-THROATED
HUMMINGBIRD
08/28/2006
darker underfeather on shoulder
ruffled scapulars: white & fluffy
Neck scratching
upper tail coverts extend almost to tip
white tips to black tail
wing out when preening breast
wing looks sharp & triangular
Scratching left side
Scratching right side
Alternately came to feeder, then returned to one of two perches – one low, one high, & both on bare, dead branches

Jocelyn Oudesluys: hummingbirds. Having the birds settled and close at hand, Jo is able to get their shape down and then add moments of gesture as they occur.

CHARACTER PORTRAYAL

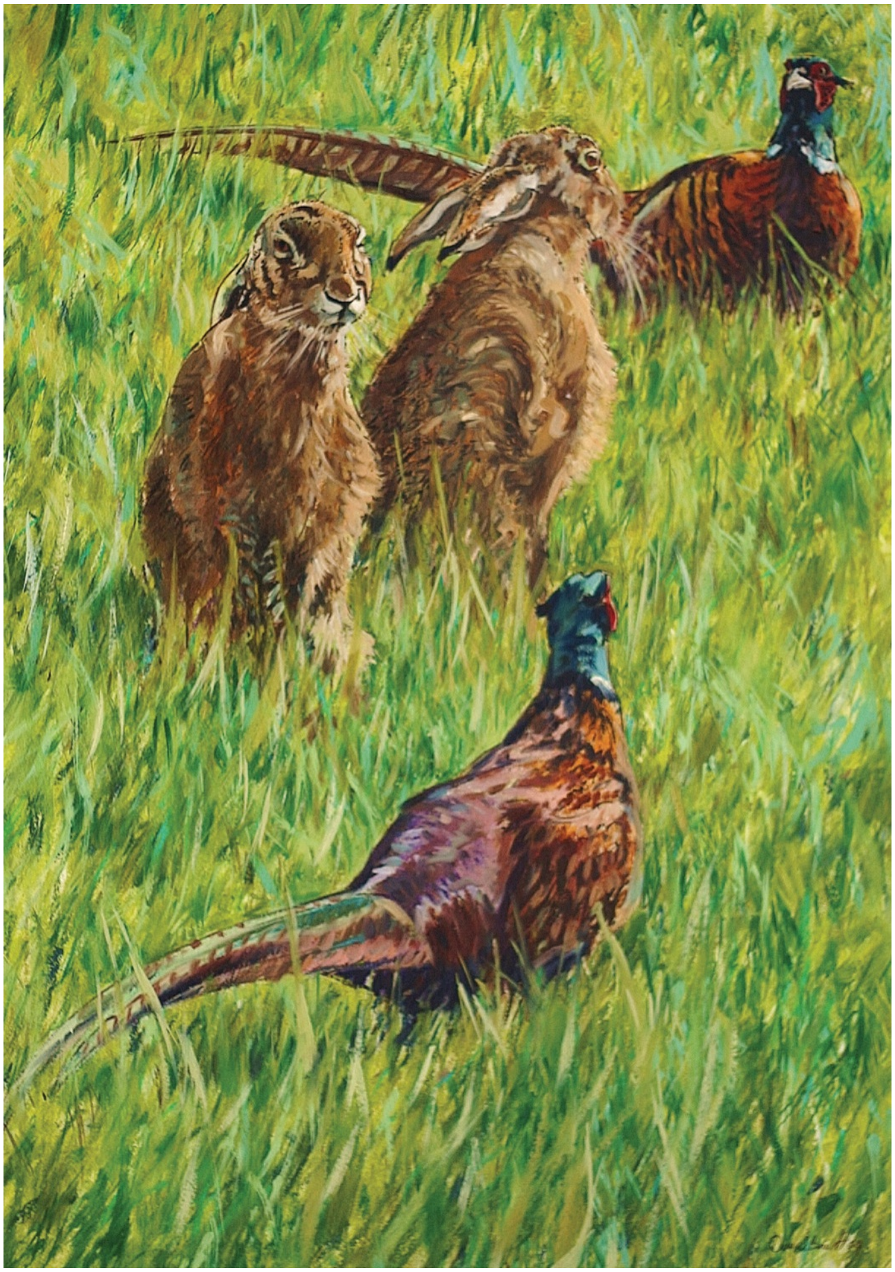
It is one thing to be able to draw a bird so it looks like the correct species, but it's quite another to give that drawing something of the character of the bird – its essence, if you like.

We've seen that when we start out drawing birds it's a good idea to find compliant models – the farmyard or backyard, duck pond or aviary. And, to a certain extent, birds will still be doing what they would do in the wild. Birds are unwittingly able to evoke so many emotions in us: squabbling over food we provide, posturing and displaying whilst courting a mate, soaring and gliding magnificently overhead, diving hundreds of feet for fish and even killing each other. But each aspect of every bird is a part of their biological make-up. The scientist would say, 'It's just what they do, they don't have right and wrong, there are no morals in nature', and I suppose the scientist is right. Nevertheless, there is so much about birds' lives that engrosses us and we share so much with birds – we use the same space, they feed on the food we provide for them, we rejoice in their breeding successes and their migration achievements, we enjoy so many aspects of their being and they can also be very amusing.



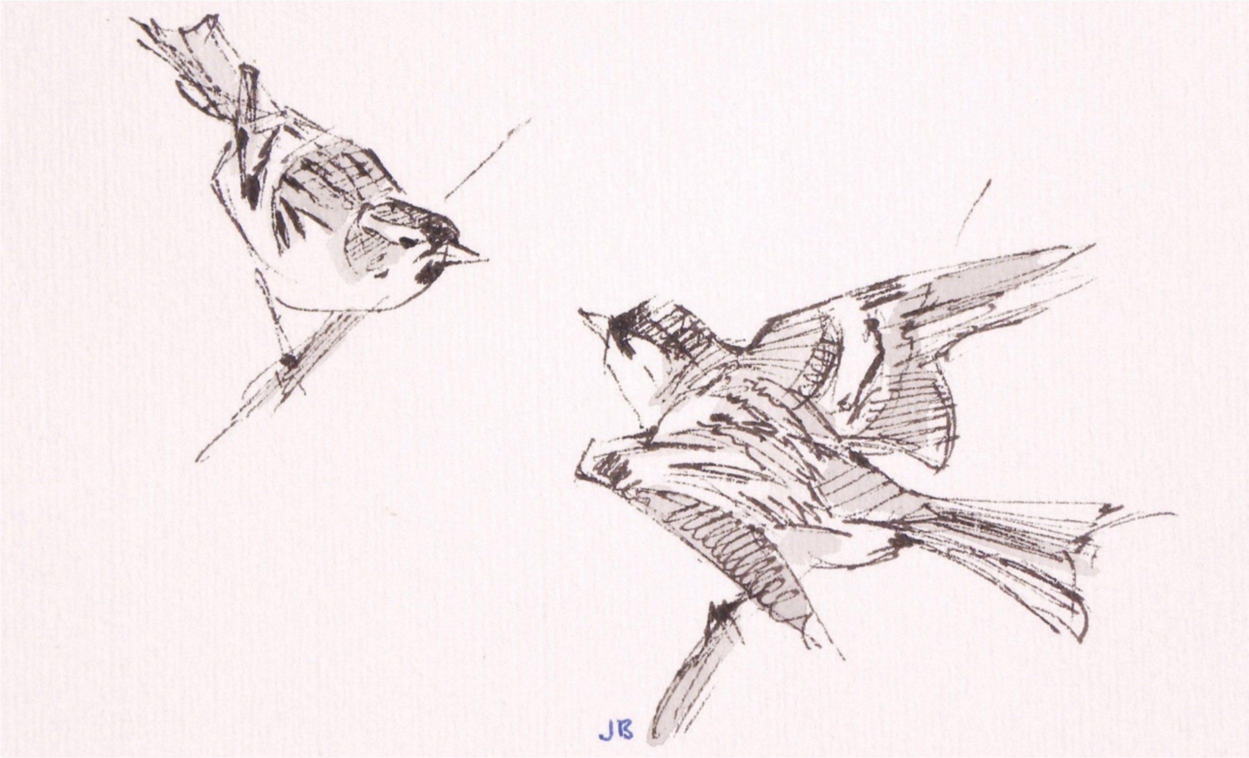
John Busby: ringed plovers displaying. A response to the pomp and the humour of the situation.

There is much we could discuss about where the line between 'documentation' and 'art' should be drawn, but in my opinion a piece works best when there's something of both in the same painting. That is (regardless of individual style and technique) that the artist has made some observation of the living, breathing creature and that specific moment has somehow connected with them. It may be some unique observation relating to the nuptial displays of an Amazonian denizen or just the way a gull scratches the back of its head whilst in flight. The technical problem in capturing these moments visually may be tricky enough. Instilling the scene with your own personal vision is another step.

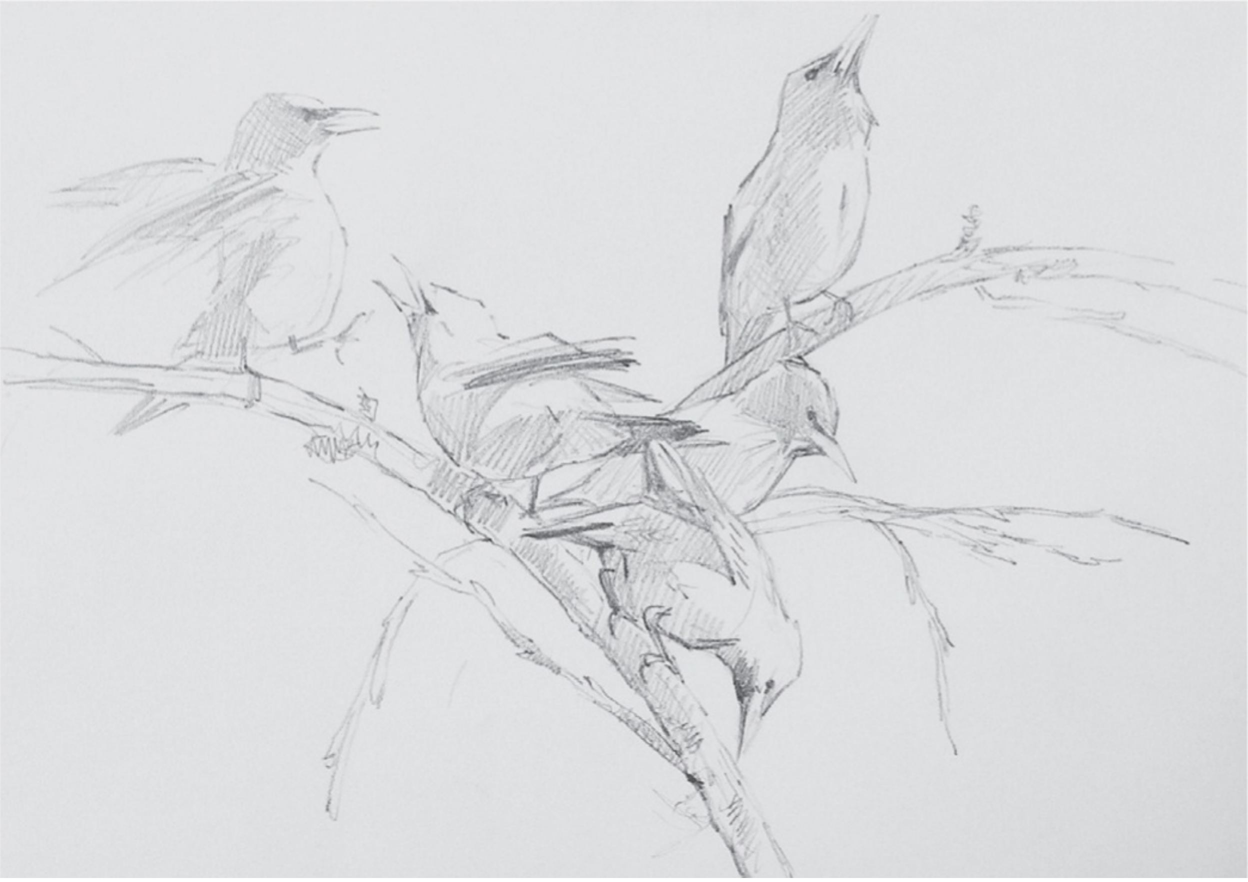


David Bennett: two cock pheasants squaring up for battle; two

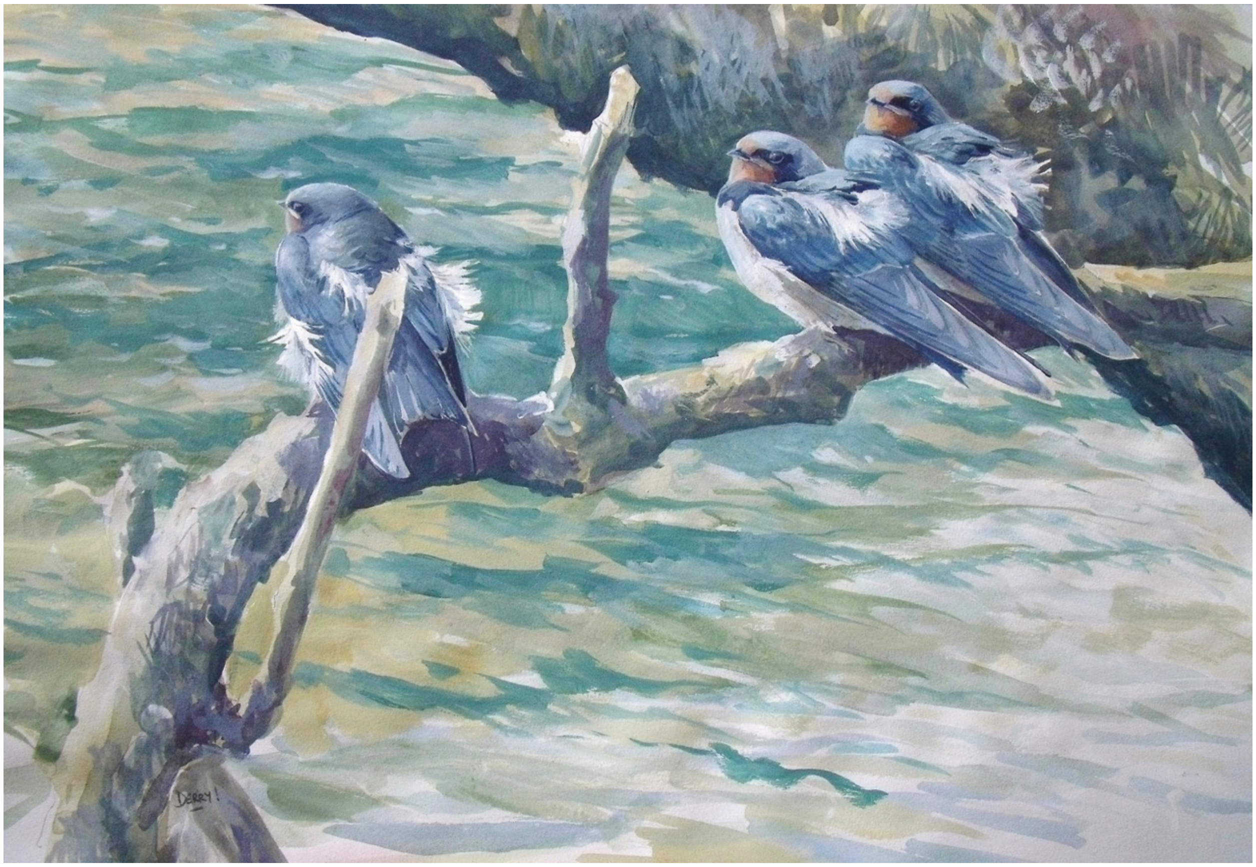
brown hares find themselves in the mix. We get a sense of sharing a unique experience with the artist, as though glancing over his shoulder while he sketches.



John Busby: two cock siskins discussing the events of the day.



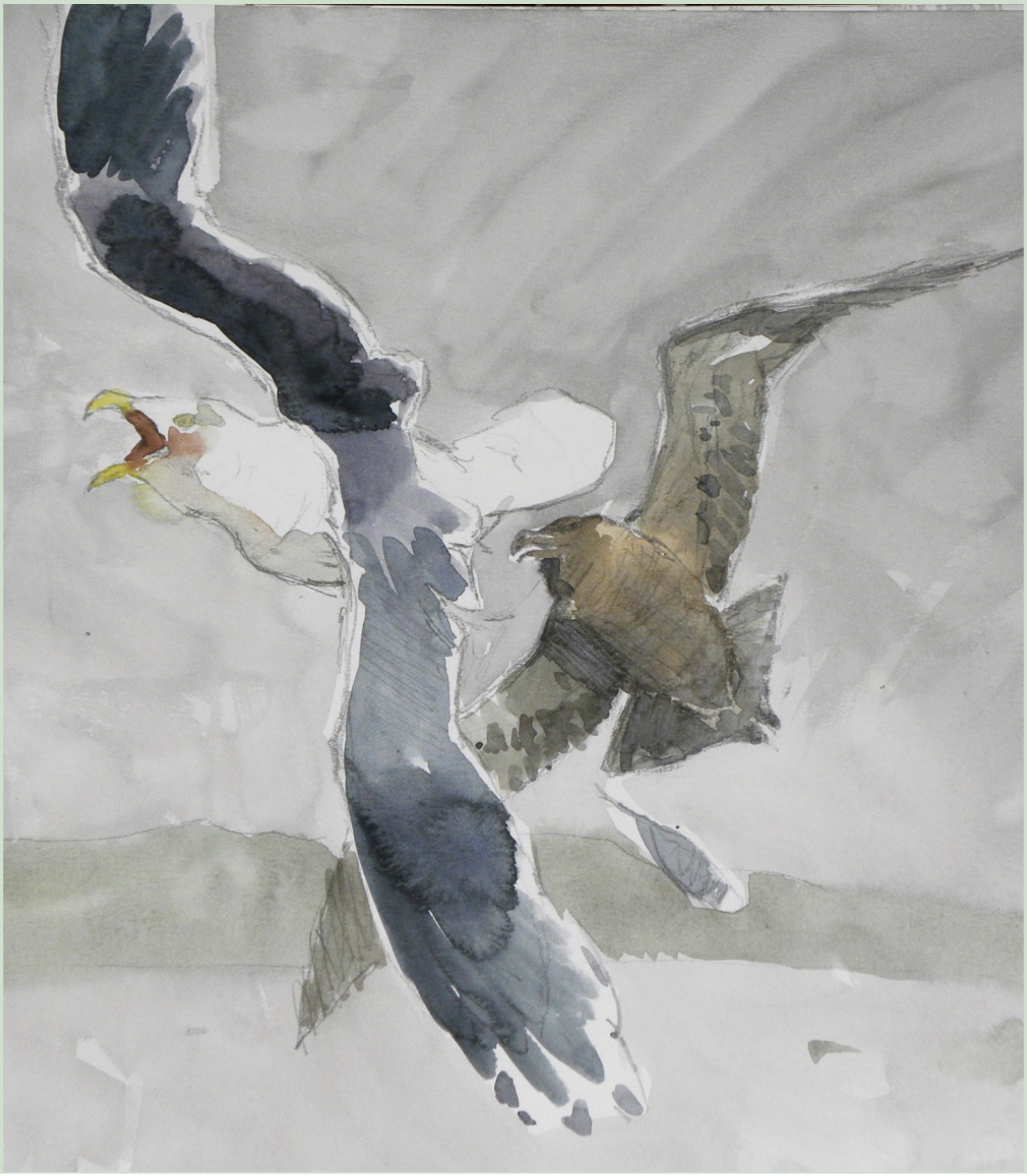
Tim Wootton: starlings socializing.



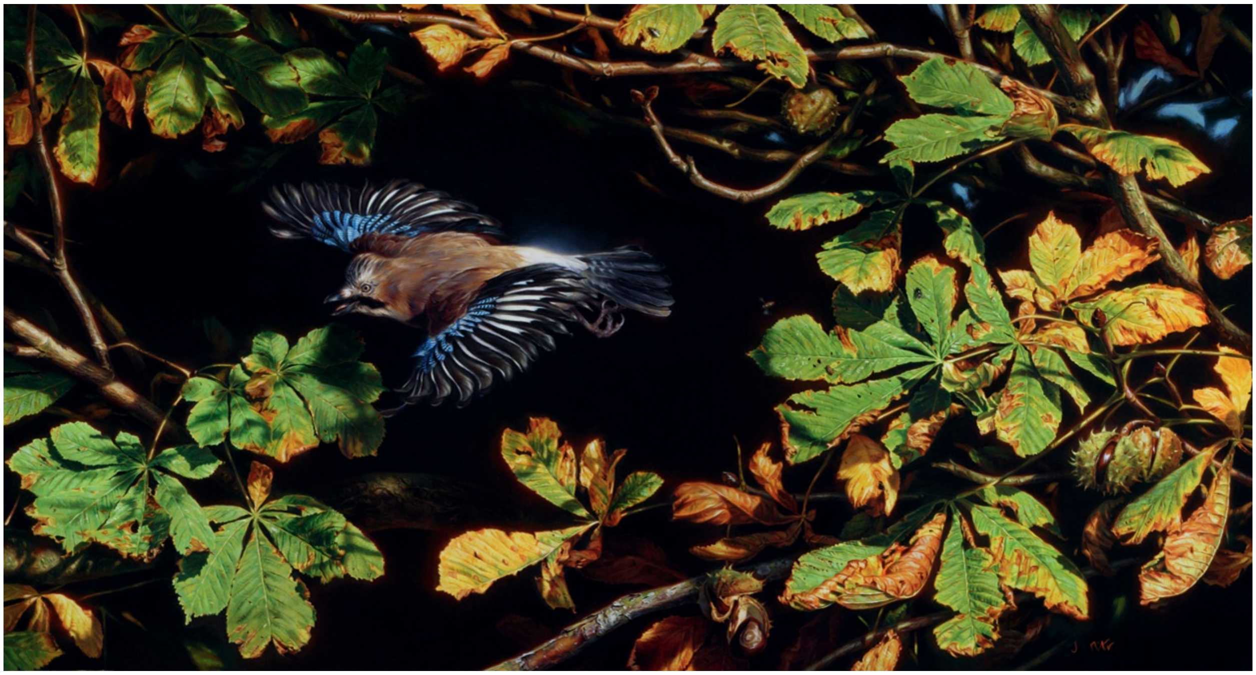
Nick Derry: a line of recently fledged swallows basking in the sunshine.

GREAT SKUA ATTACKING A GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL

Birds are great to watch and there's always something to engage and entertain if you keep you eyes open. Often you'll see starlings – robust little birds – being pursued and harassed by house sparrows, birds half their size. A robin defending delicacies on a birdtable will show the pluck of a warrior – some birds just have a swagger about them. In the north breed the skuas – piratical and irresistible, and the biggest of them (the great skua, bonxie) simply has no fear, of other birds nor of man. I made the sketch immediately after the event; I first heard and then watched a great black-backed gull yelping in angst as it came sweeping across the bay. The reason for its distress was following close behind, swerving and twisting in the gull’s slipstream, intent on piracy: a bonxie. I watched the skua hunt the gull for many seconds, totally engrossed with the sight and curious of the result. Near the end of the encounter both birds flew almost directly overhead and I saw the bonxie grab the gull by its wing, spinning it round and trying to ditch it in the sea, where the gull may have been drowned – but it escaped; two or three secondary feathers ripped from their seats and left floating on the breeze. The skua relinquished its task and the gull fled the scene, leaving me to try and work out in my mind’s eye what I’d just witnessed.



Tim Wootton: great skua attacking a great back-backed gull.



Jonathan Pointer: *Autumn Jay* (oil on canvas). An example of what can be achieved when photographs are part of the artist's arsenal.

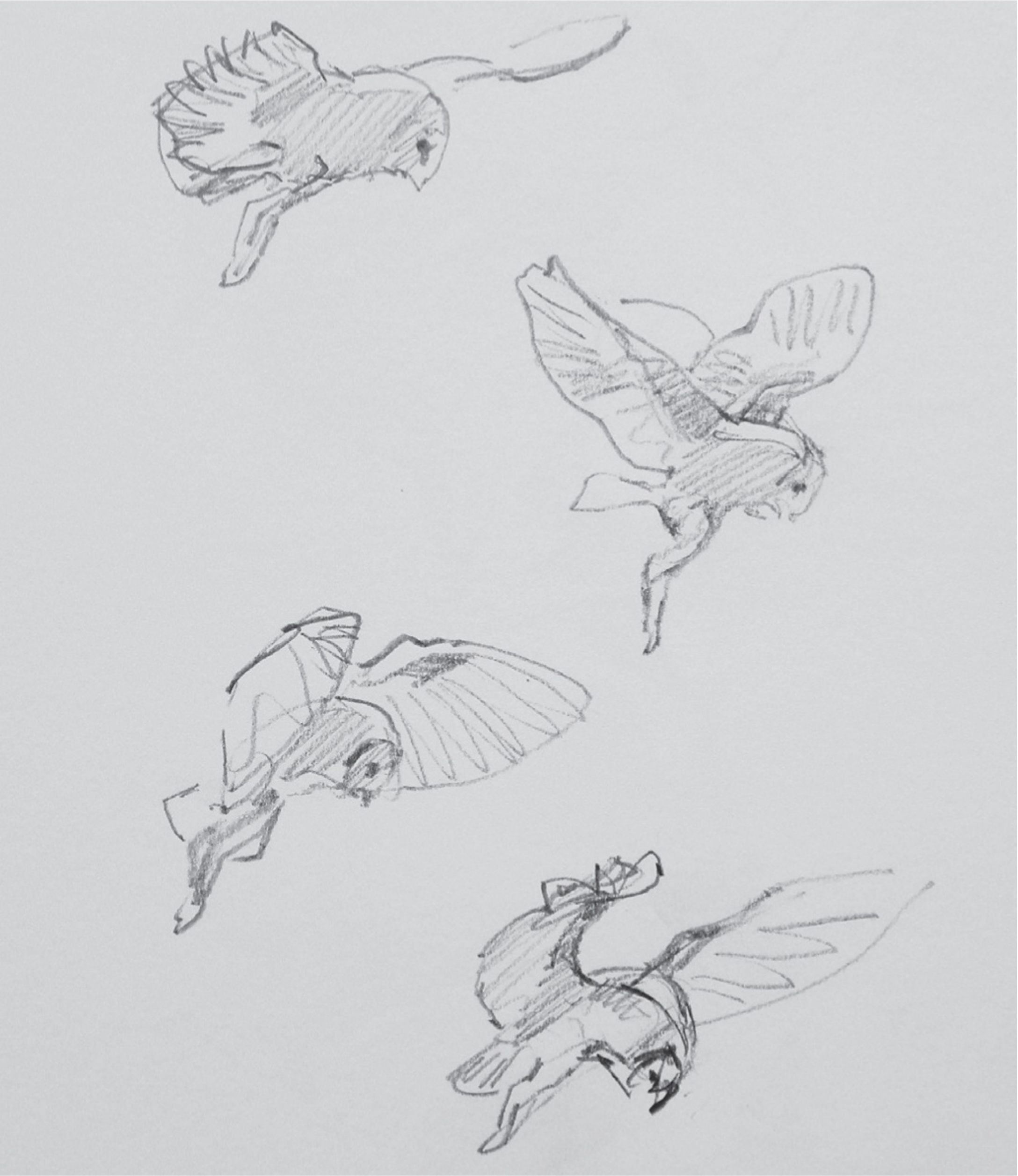
THE ROLE OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN BIRD PAINTING

Photography is a very useful tool, as we have discussed in Chapter 2, but if you do not have the necessary knowledge of anatomy and the way a particular bird moves, then any work resulting directly from this single source is likely to lack any sense of life. High-definition images of birds are too often the starting point for many paintings. The pitfalls are many: not least the fact that even if a precise and accurate replication of the photograph is achieved, then all that results is a copy. Moreover, all of the creative decisions will also have already been made by the original photographer, including the composition of the image.

Having said that, there are many ways the wildlife artist can utilize photographic images and it is always best if you have taken your own pictures. Besides the legal issue of potential copyright infringement, there is a moral one regarding the use of someone else's work. A photograph that you have taken yourself may not have wonderful detail and glorious colours, but it will evoke memories of the actual experience of seeing the bird in the wild and the sense of excitement of the encounter will pervade the painting as you work. Where there is missing detail, you will have to interpret and use your recollection of the event. In short, you will have to be creative.

Photographing birds is a craft and an art form in itself and may take many years (and great expense) to master; however, the development of digital photography has opened up new avenues of potential. Where with film photography there would be a surfeit of wasted prints, with digital any unusable shots can simply be deleted. Birdwatchers have recently begun to adapt the equipment they already possess for the purpose of bird photography. All manner of devices are now available which will attach a digital camera to a spotting scope, effectively converting it into a high-powered camera lens. This technique is known as 'digi-scoping' and amazing results can be had with a little practice.

No matter how you approach the rendering of your subject, at some point you will wish to include some aspect of its environment. Snapshots of rocks and trees are useful to have for reference and a compact camera is a valuable tool to take into the field.

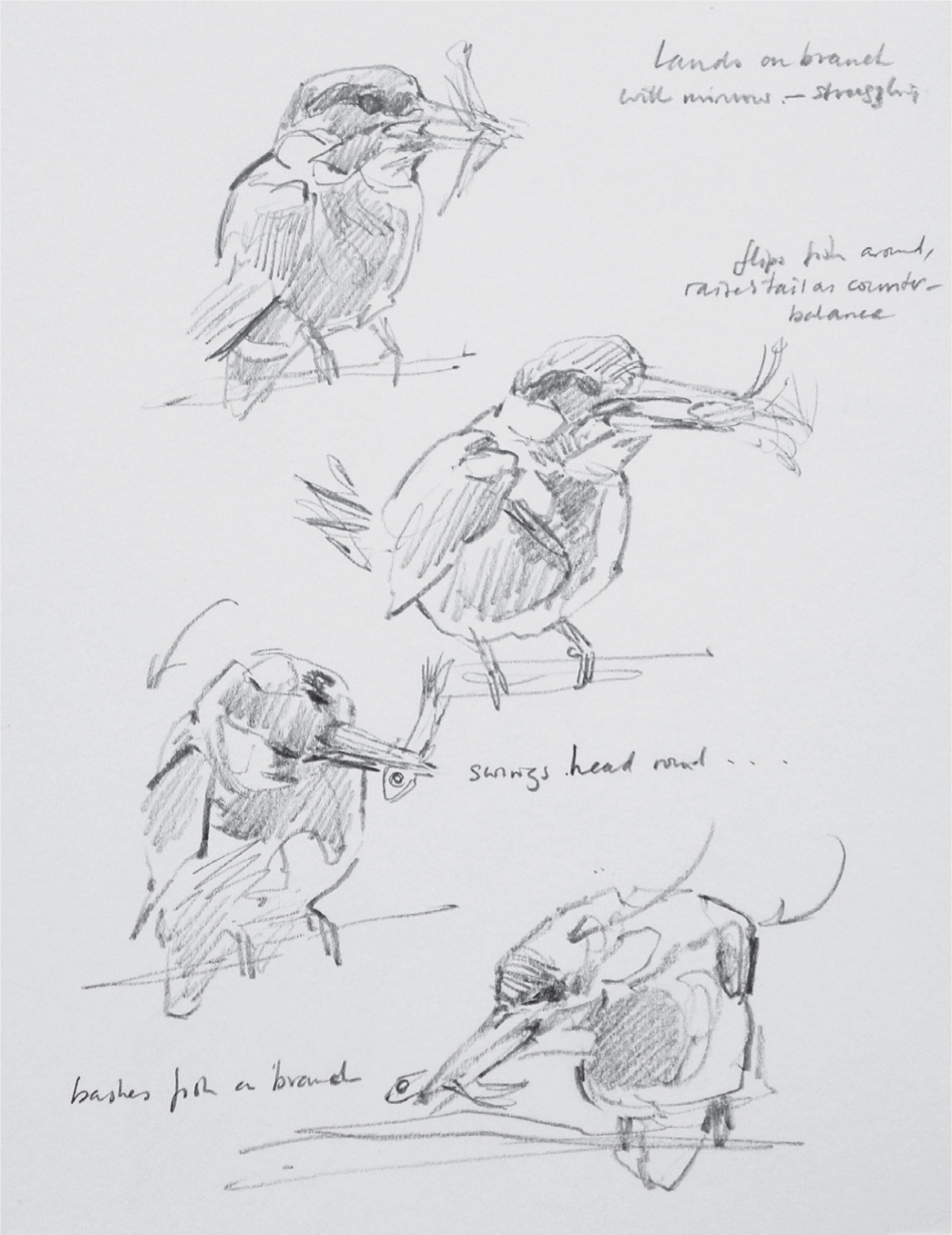


Tim Wootton: barn owl hunting sequence from video footage. I used video footage for these drawings, set to play at normal speed. Whenever the movement became confusing I rewound the tape and played at slow motion so I could see what was happening. I think using video allows the artist to retain some of the spontaneity of field work and could be used as practice for the real thing. It has the advantage over traditional still photography in that you retain the feeling of movement.

VIDEO AND FILM

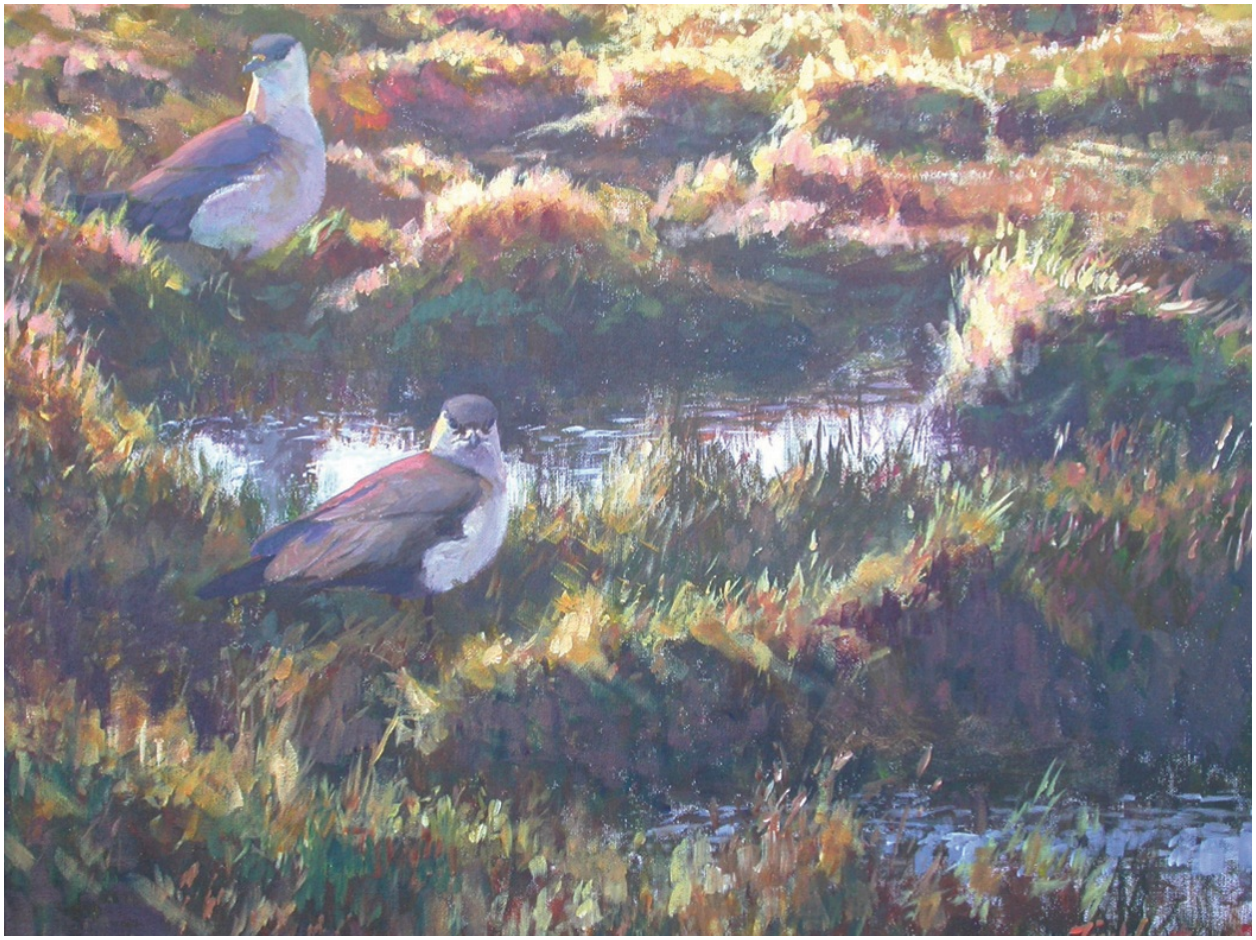
In addition, the use of video cameras can help to recall a certain experience from the field, and drawing from moving images whilst in the relative comfort of your own sitting room can be a way to break down the psychological barrier of working from the living bird. Although digital video cameras aren’t cheap, many compact digital cameras have a video function, allowing you to take short clips of moving images which can be informative to review.

If you are keen to try working from motion footage I would recommend you approach it as though in the field. I don’t mean by hiding behind the sofa or wearing camouflaged clothing, but acknowledge the image is a moving one and try to impart some of the action into your drawing. Resist the temptation to keep pausing the action and only do this to clarify certain passages of movement. Once you have it clear in your mind’s eye, then return to normal speed and continue drawing. If you are to use this technique, I certainly think it best to shoot your own footage; not only is this the ethical way, but it also means you will have been in the field with your birds and some of this will be communicated in your work. Of course, you could still take your sketchbook too.…

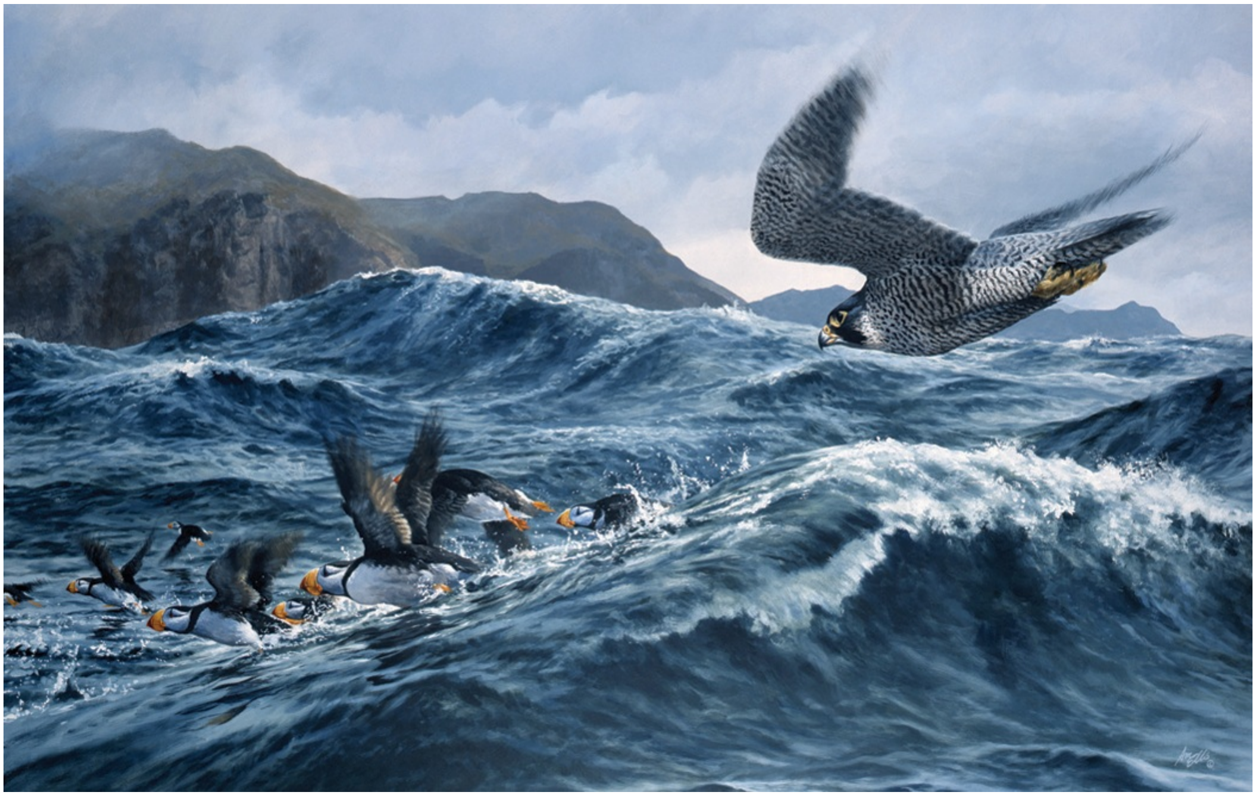

Lands on branch
with minnow — struggling
flips fish around,
raises tail as counter-
balance
swings head round . . .
bashes fish on branch

Tim Wootton: kingfisher subduing a minnow, drawn from video footage. Directional arrows contribute to the sense of action.

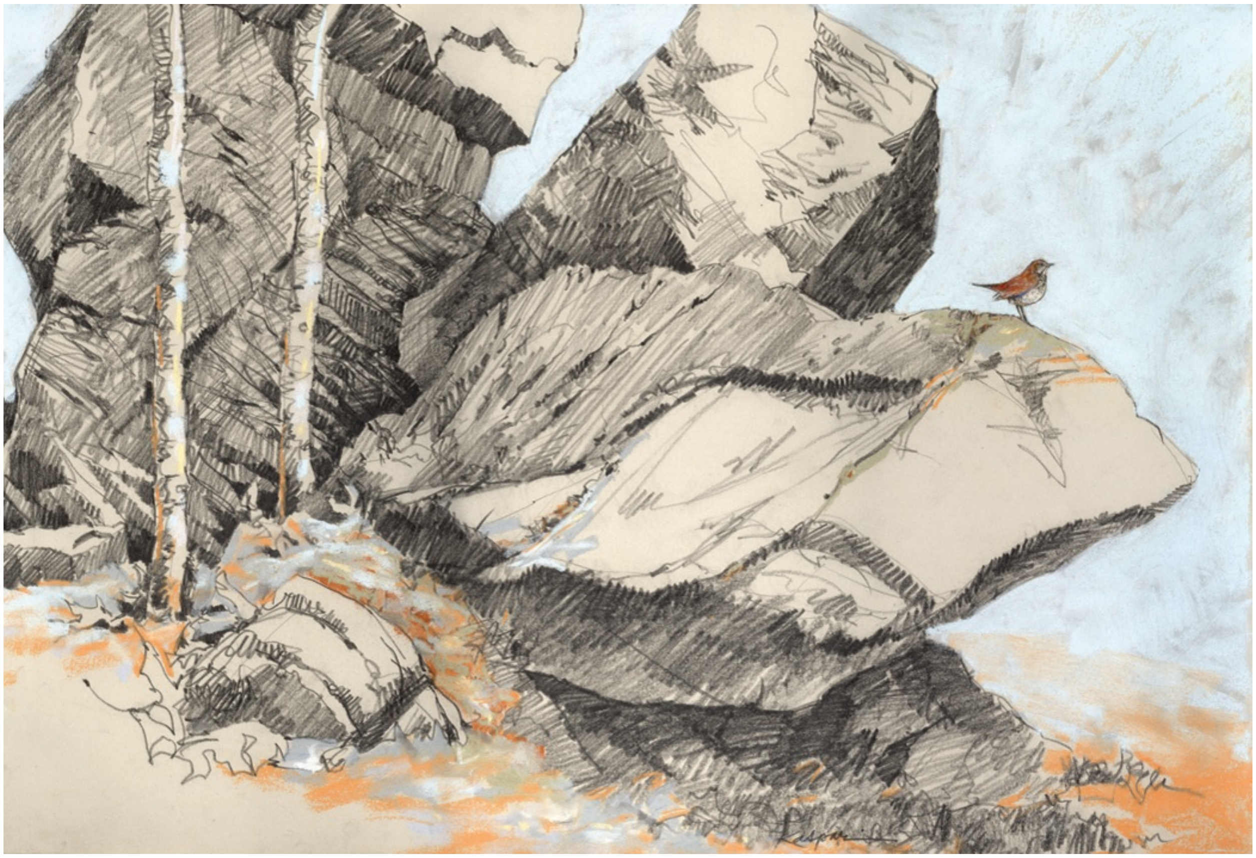
The previous techniques and approaches are useful ways to start your journey into drawing and painting birds but there really is no substitute for working from the living creature, in its own habitat. It is only whilst out in the field that you will experience the real drama and thrill of contact with wildlife, even when they don’t appear to be doing much. Sometimes the calmest scenes have an energy and vibrancy difficult to convey, just because of the presence of the birds themselves.



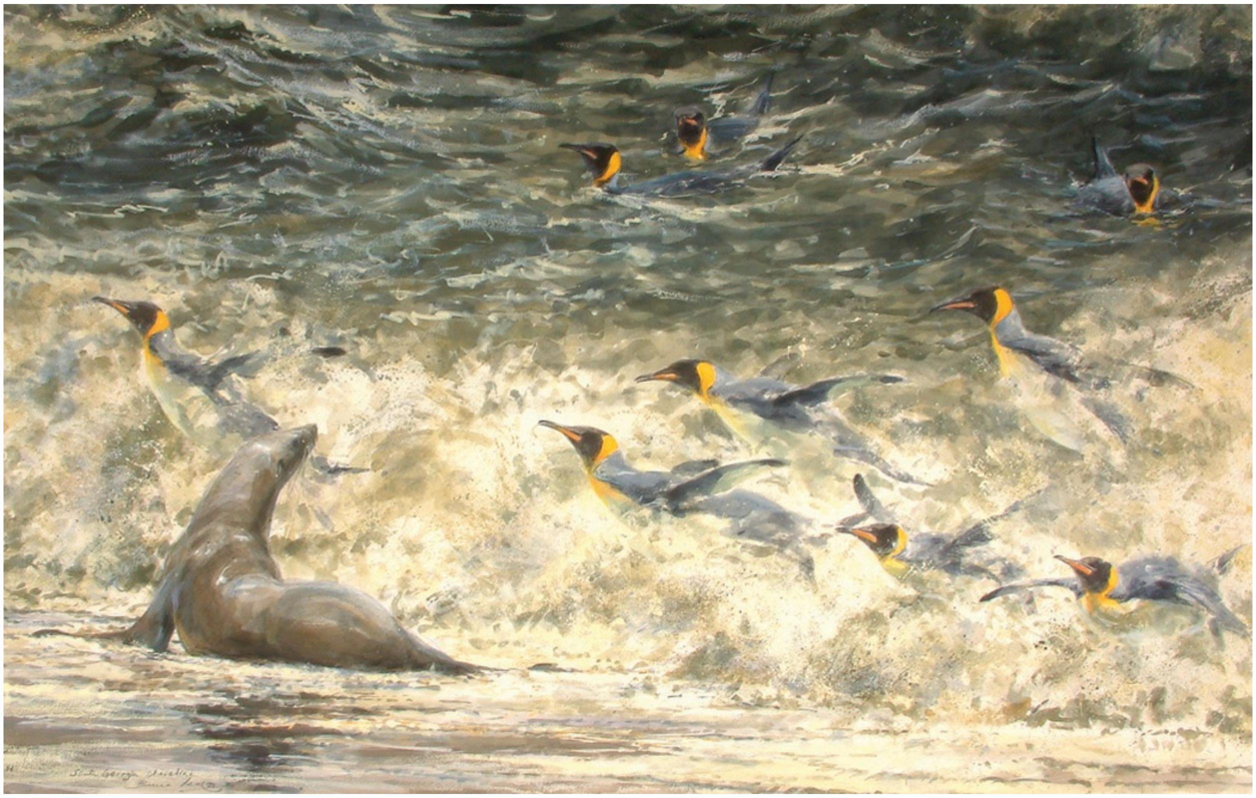
Tim Wootton: summer evening, arctic skua pair. I spent many summer afternoons studying this pair of pale-phase arctic skuas on their suspected nest site. It took me several visits before I could finally confirm they had bred successfully when I spotted a tiny movement behind a tussock of sedges – a skua chick. This painting depicts the parent birds aware of the viewer yet also confident their young are secreted safely in the vegetation.



Andrew Ellis: *Puffin Pursuit*. Besides being a gifted artist, Andy is also a dedicated falconer and he is able to combine both these passions to create incredible images like this. He regularly uses still photography and shoots his own motion footage of birds being flown, to supplement his fieldwork. Concept, drama, composition and technique, however, come entirely from the artist.



Debby Kaspari: *Quarry Hermit*.



Bruce Pearson: fur seal and emperor penguins. Dramatic and bursting with activity, the artist communicates the thrill of his original vision – a real feeling of sharing the experience.

CHAPTER 7

ELEMENTS OF COMPOSITION: PLACING BIRDS IN CONTEXT

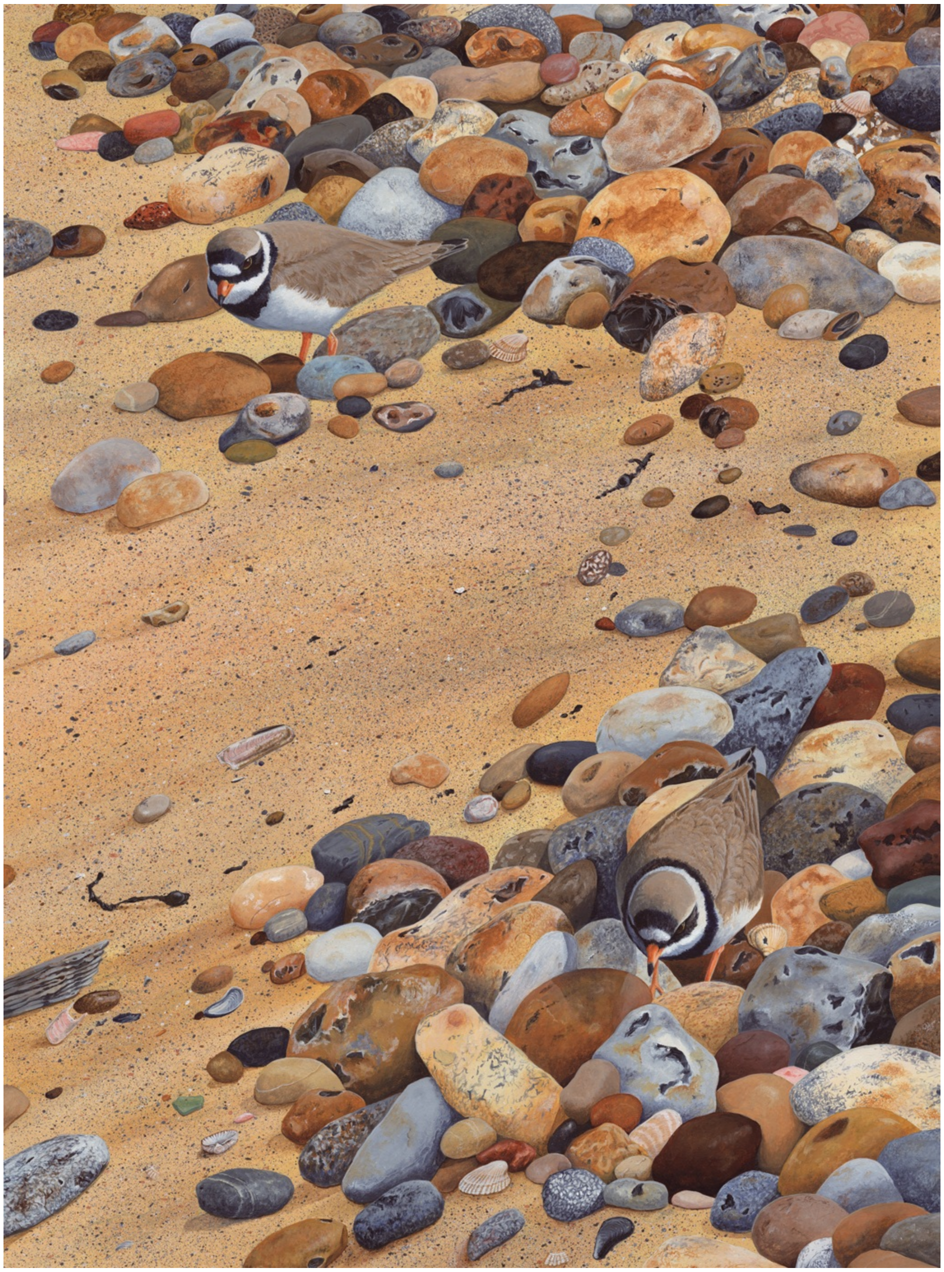
Even in front of nature one must compose.

Edgar Degas

No matter what the illusion created, it is a flat canvas and it has to be organized into shape.

David Hockney

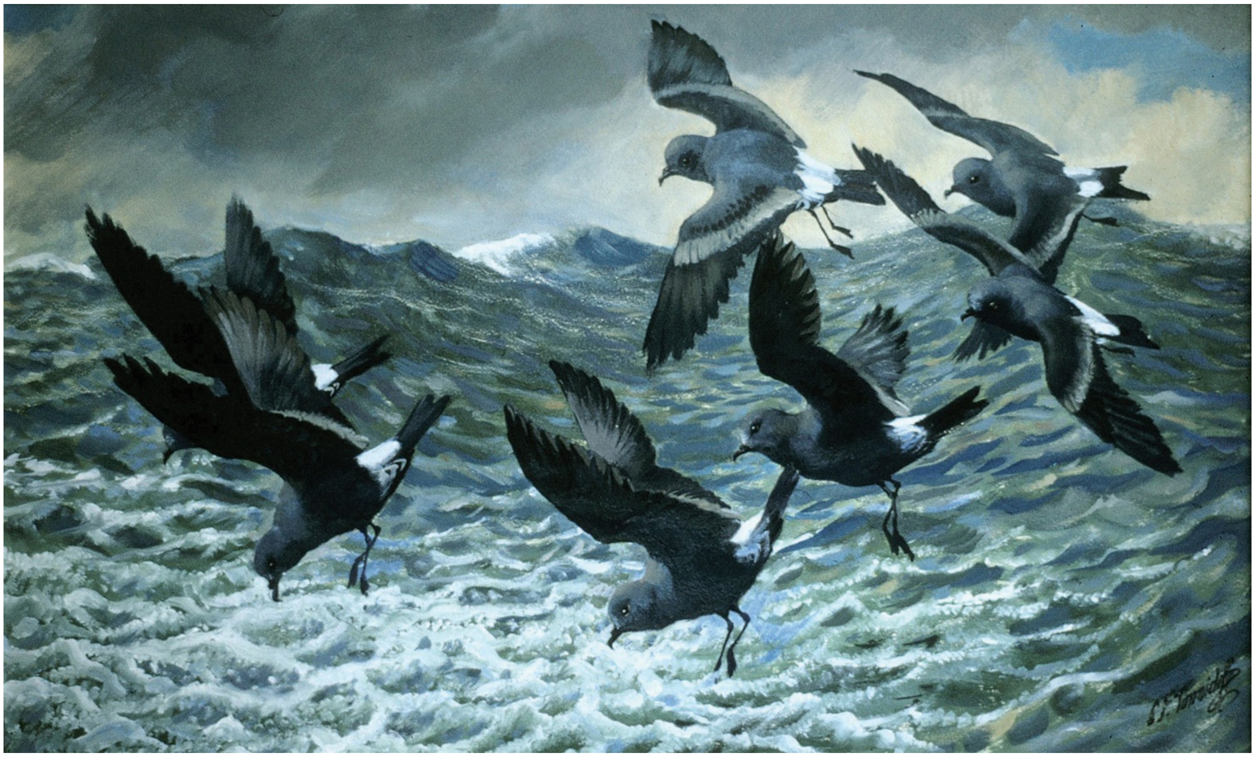
There is more to painting birds than just the birds themselves. As artists we look to inhabit the places of birds and something of those places should come to inhabit us too. The finest pieces of bird art will transport the viewer to that special and specific place where we will share something of the original vision the artist first had; the vision which sparked the desire to make the art.



Mike Woodcock: *Treasure Seekers*.

Placing birds in context can be as simple as giving it a branch to perch on, or creating a jungle in which your bird can dwell. The way you place things in a picture can be just as important as what you include – and what you decide to leave out.

A bird suspended in, and surrounded by, a world of white paper can have an intrinsic beauty and purity of image; however, for that image to translate to a version of reality, it ought to be placed in context. This means the bird's habitat and how it behaves there need to be referred to. The study, understanding and ability to render rocks, leaves, clouds, water, etc., are important aspects of painting nature.



C.F. Tunnicliffe: Wilson's storm petrels.

Composition is the balance and arrangement of shapes, colours and tones on the page. Composition influences the way the eye moves across and around the painted surface. Linear shapes can help to divide areas away from one another and can link different areas together, as can colours and values (tones) with complementary properties. Composition is also as much about the negative spaces between positive areas as it is about the positive areas themselves. It's how it all comes together.

Strong, or 'good', compositions will have a natural feel, but we can employ a few little rules to help us to create designs that sit pleasingly on the canvas.

Initially it is a good idea to decide what the painting is about, what the focal point(s) of the painting will be, and how best to work this into the composition. Firstly, try to avoid the main focus being right in the centre of the design as this will catch and hold the eye, preventing the viewer from exploring the rest of the painting.

THE RULE OF THIRDS

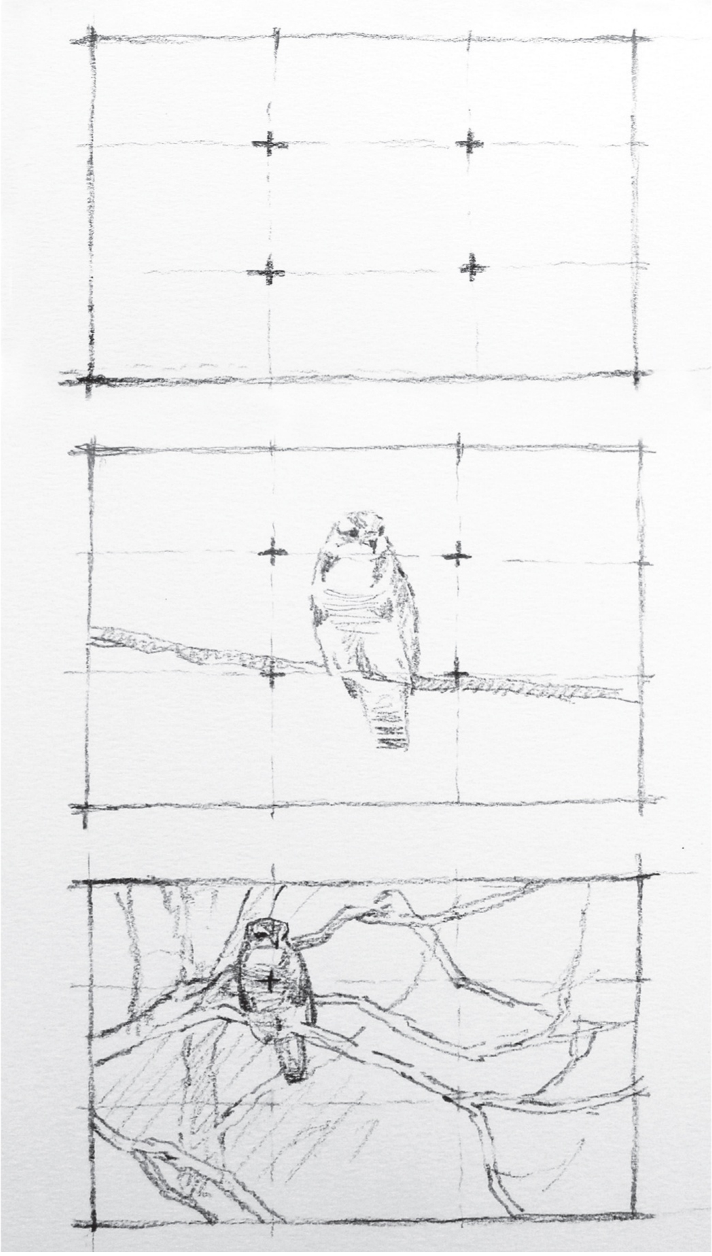
Divide your canvas into thirds horizontally and vertically. The intersections can be described as top left, top right, bottom left and bottom right. Start by placing the main focus on one of these intersections and think of subtle ways to lead the eye towards this point (strips of colour, swathes of vegetation, for example).

Dividing into three doesn’t always have to mean three equal slices, of course. Mathematics again can provide us with many interesting options on the theme. The painting opposite, *Waxwing*, is composed on a diagonal ‘Y’ design where the canvas is dissected diagonally from top left to bottom right and then again from top right to centre.

There are many ways in which we can visually divide the canvas. It’s fun and quite exciting to play around with compositional design to find out what works – and what doesn’t! When you decide what the central theme for the painting is going to be and how you think it best represented, there is a variety of options for putting together a design.

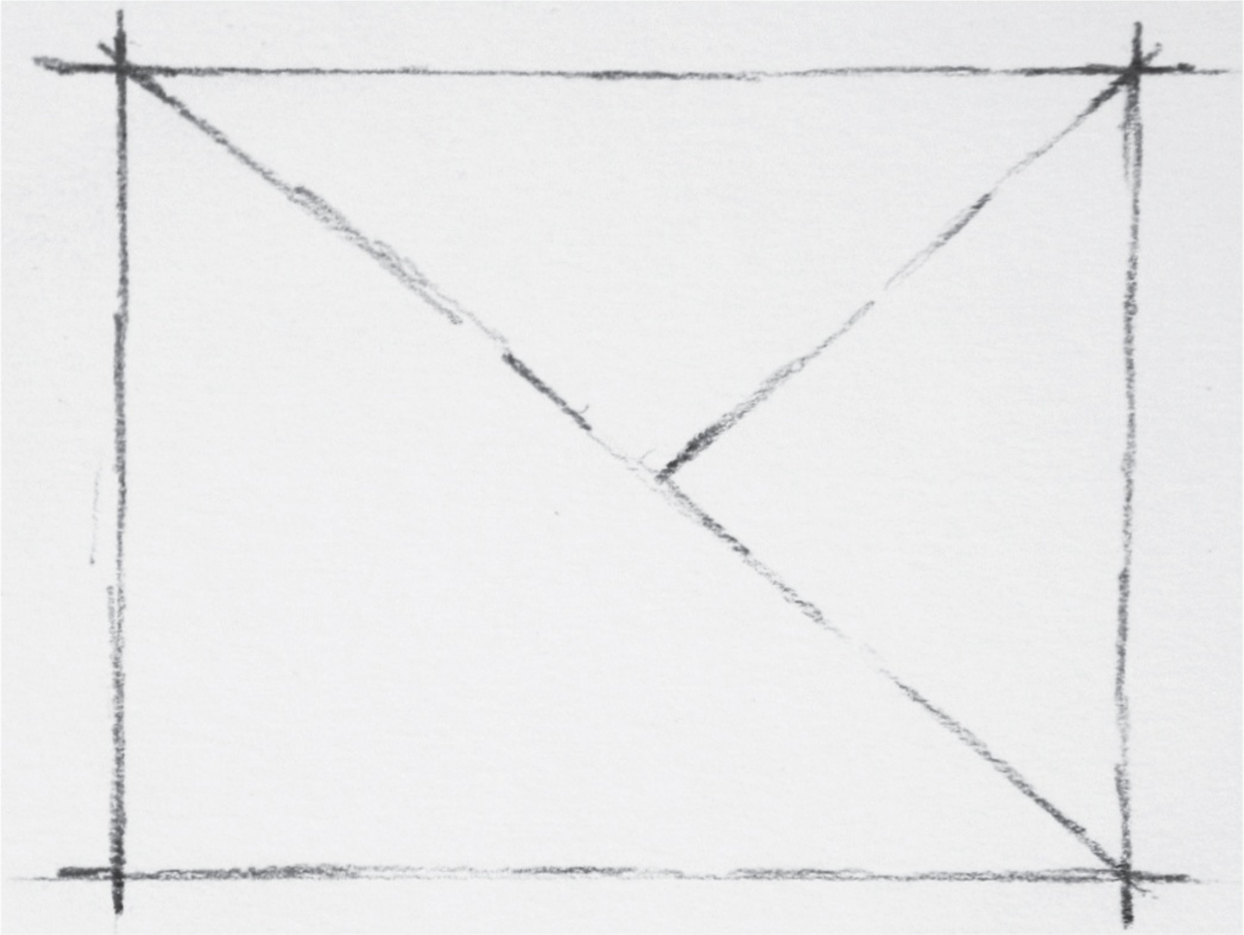
Thumbnails are small versions of the prospective piece; you can play with the shapes and content in the picture, work out different angles and viewpoints and also try tone and colours in preparation for committing to full-colour work. Try dividing the space up into thirds and fifths in various ways; you’ll see there is much potential for creating new and different visions of the same subject. Think about how you want the viewer to look at the painting: are they going to be distant onlookers or do you want them to become more intimately engaged with the painting? The larger the subjects in relation to their surroundings, the closer you will be bringing the viewer into the painting.

A useful technique for designing your picture is to make paper cut-outs of the main elements you are planning to incorporate in the picture. Using cut-out shapes allows you to move the various components of the painting around. This helps to visualize the main structures in the design and also helps to see where the negative space is and how it contributes to the dynamism of the piece. This technique can be particularly helpful when planning designs that include several birds in flight. You can overlap wings and alter the scale of some of them, creating interlocking features and introduce a feeing of depth to the piece.

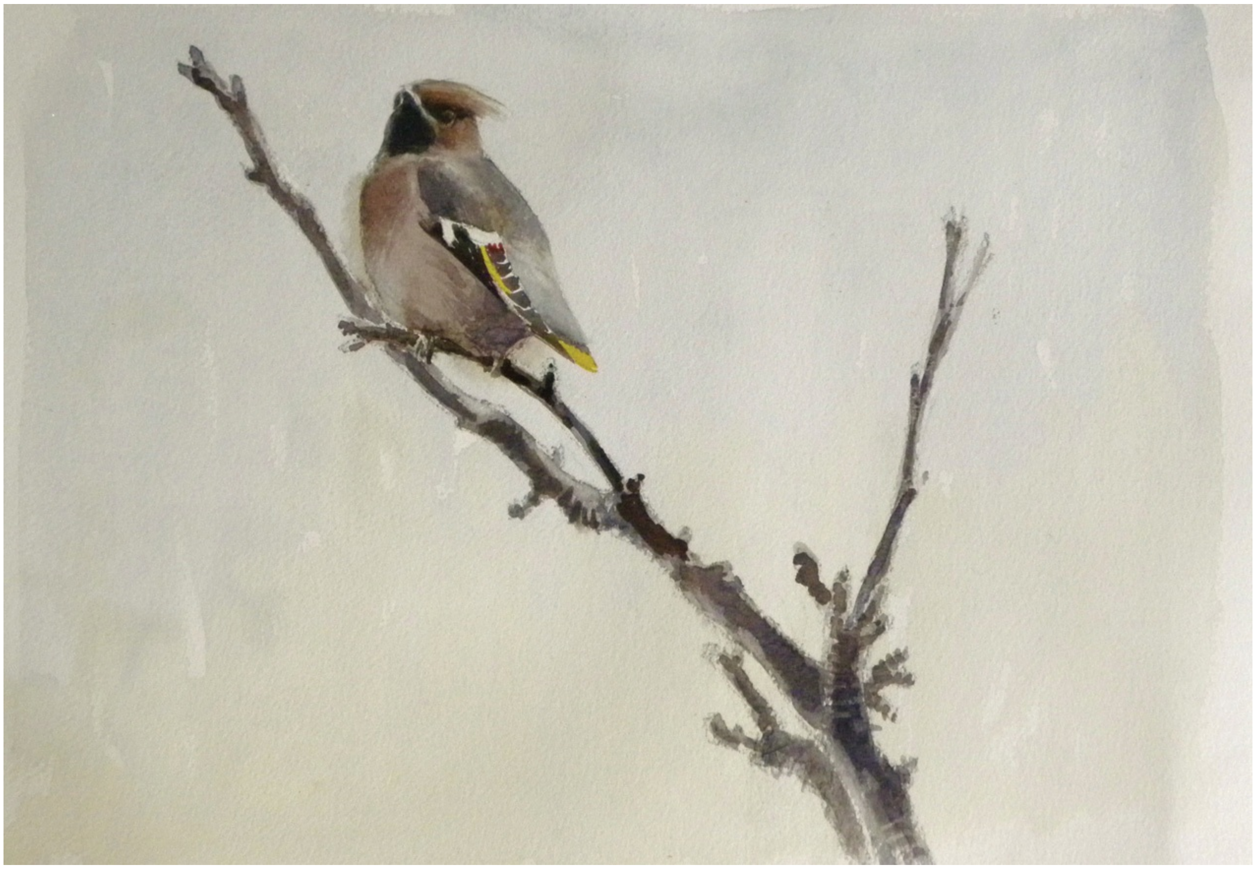


The top frame shows the canvas divided into thirds horizontally and vertically – we could describe the intersections as ‘hotspots’ in compositional terms. The middle frame has the subject placed in the centre of the canvas, creating a very formal and fairly bland picture. The bottom frame has the subject placed directly over one of the ‘hotspots’; branches radiate from the subject, leading the eye

of the 'hotspots', branches radiate from the subject, leading the eye back into the main focus of the painting. The off-set style of design leaves enough visual space to incorporate interesting pieces of environment resulting in a pleasing, balanced picture.

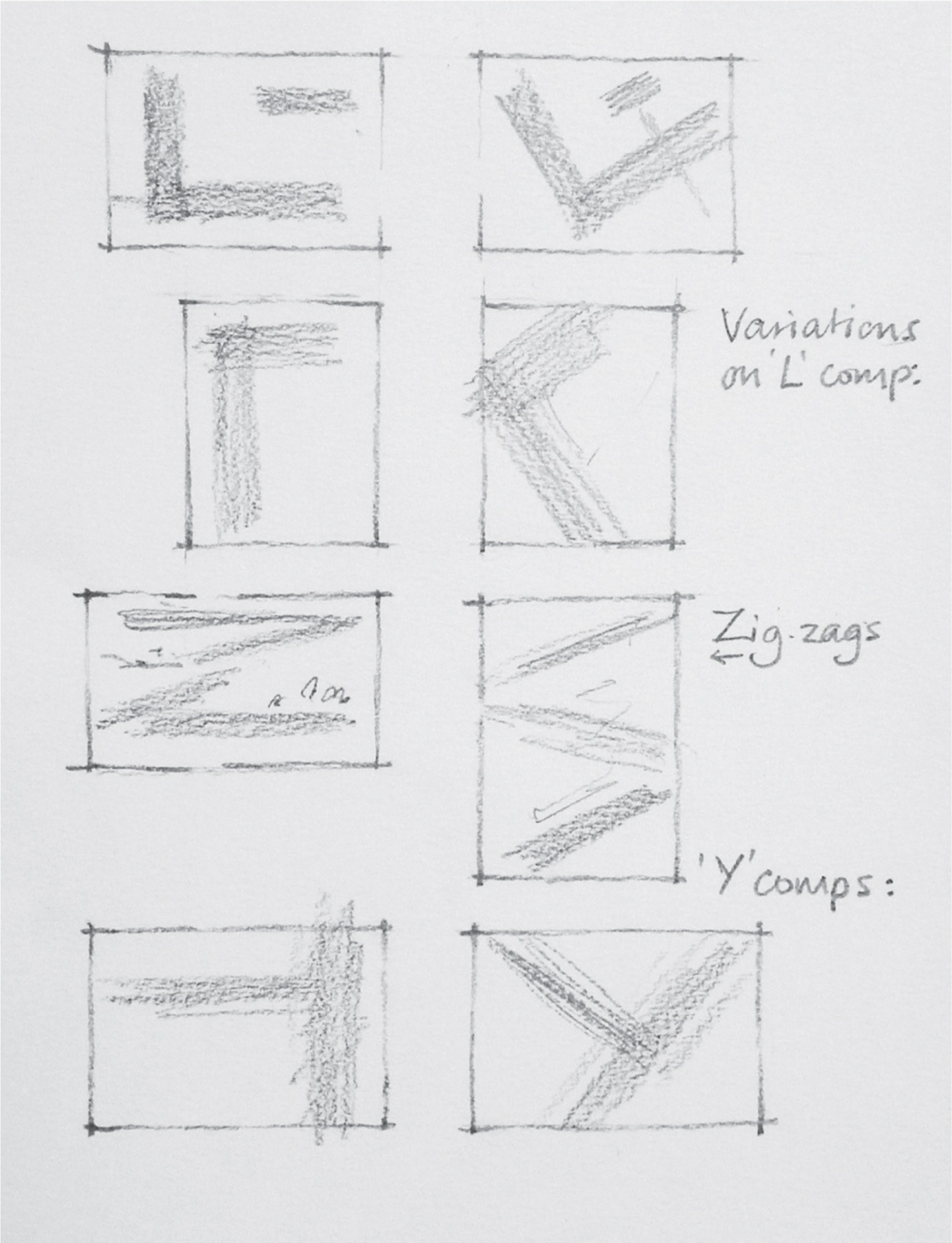


Tim Wootton: compositional plan of ‘Waxwing’.

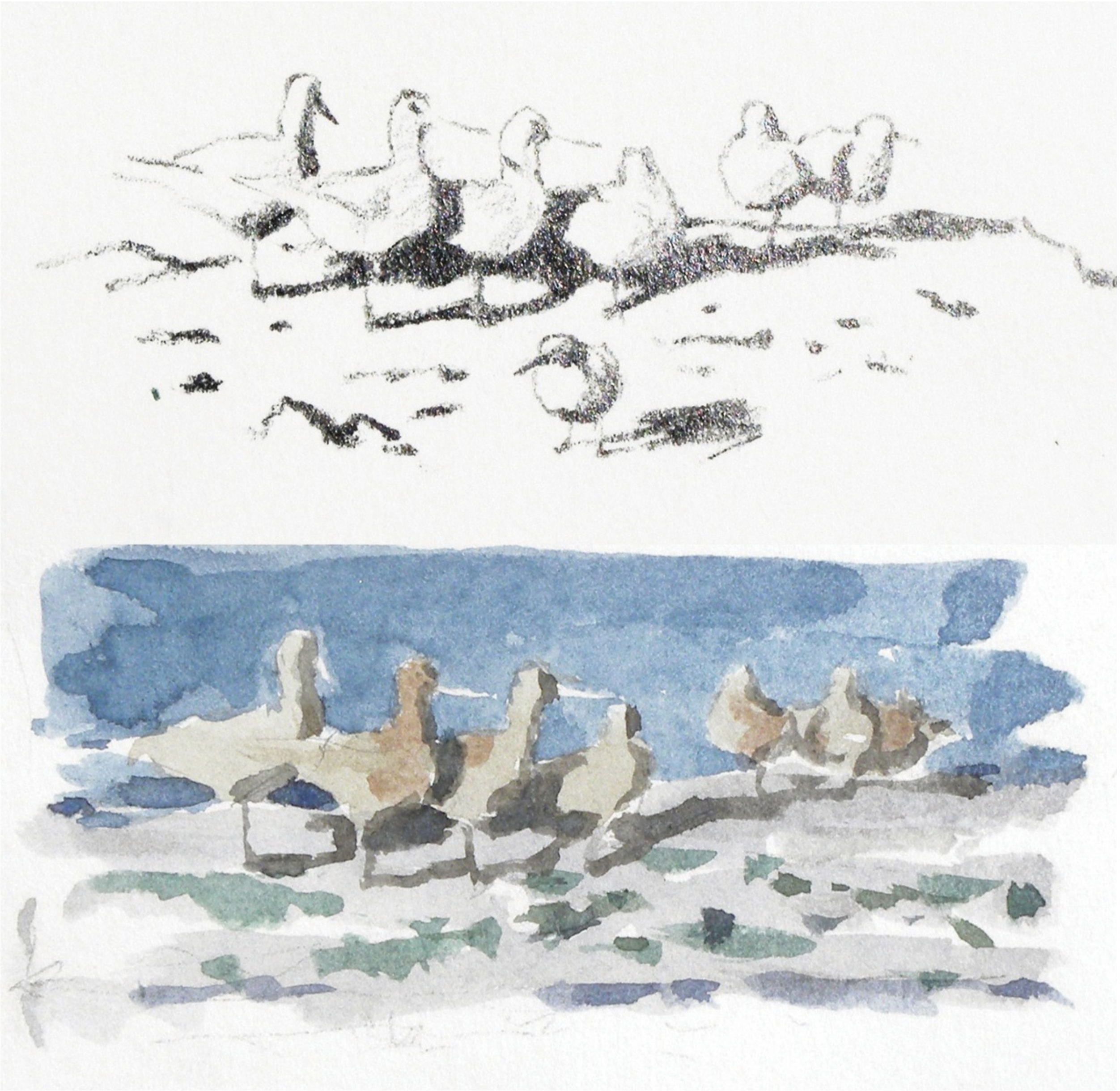


Tim Wootton: *Waxwing*. Here the canvas has been divided by the branches of the ash tree into three triangular-shaped, but decreasing in size, sections of negative space. The composition retains a sense of movement because the eye is allowed to roam around the three sectors unhindered; were the branches to extend beyond the confines of the picture bounds, the delineation would be more severe and the eye wouldn't have such an easy, flowing passage around the piece.

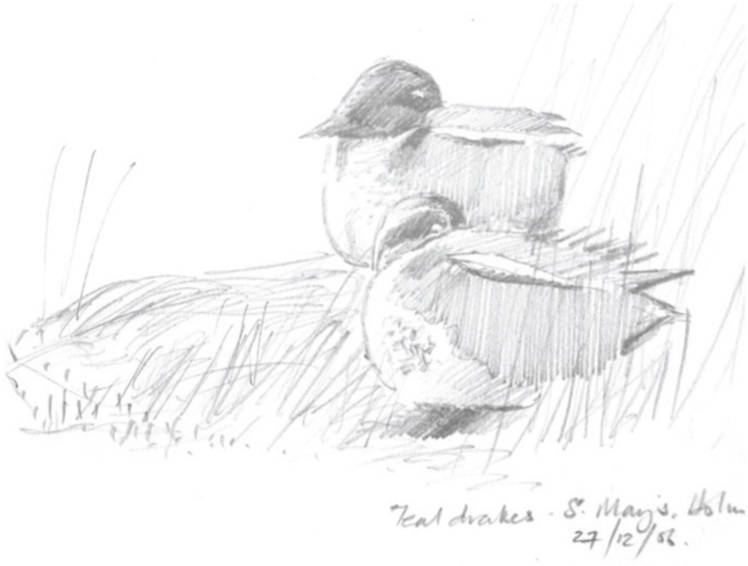
Depth in a painting can be suggested in many ways. Relative scale is a useful tool as are some of the colour rules. It may be helpful to imagine your support (canvas, paper, etc.) not as a two-dimensional surface, but as a transparent box, like a fish tank, within which your subjects for the painting can be suspended. Using this threedimensional vision, your sense of perspective and depth within the painting will be enhanced.

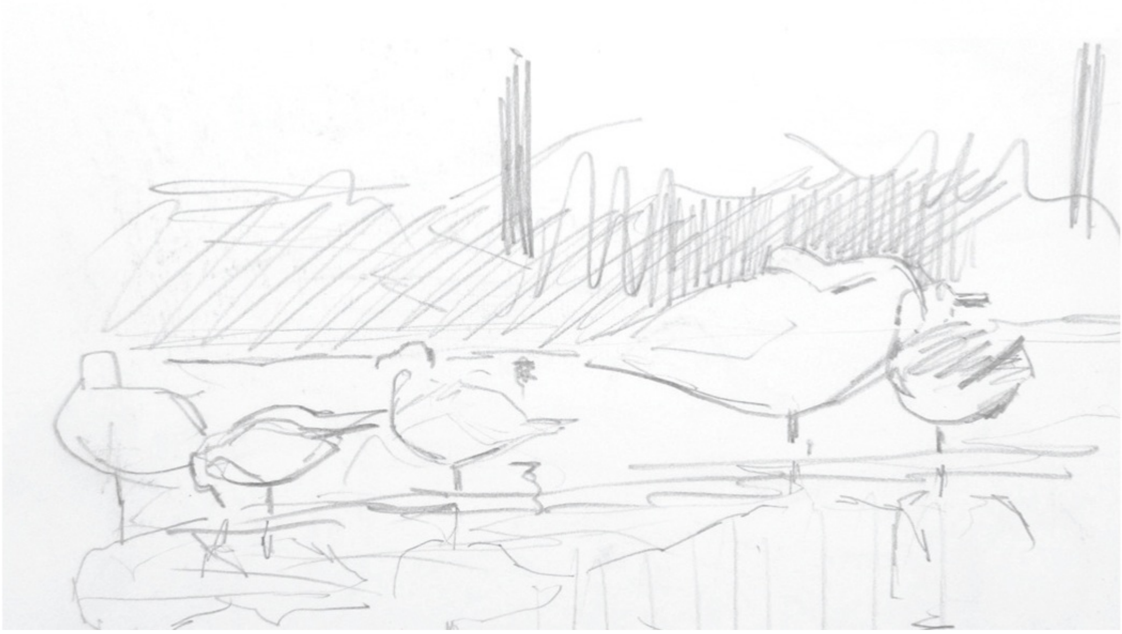

Variations on 'L' comp:
Zig-zags ←
'Y' comps:

Tim Wootton: a selection of composition forms.



John Busby: composition thumbnails – ways of seeing concentrations of lights and shadows and distribution of colour through a picture.


Teal drakes · St. Mary's, Holm
27/12/86.

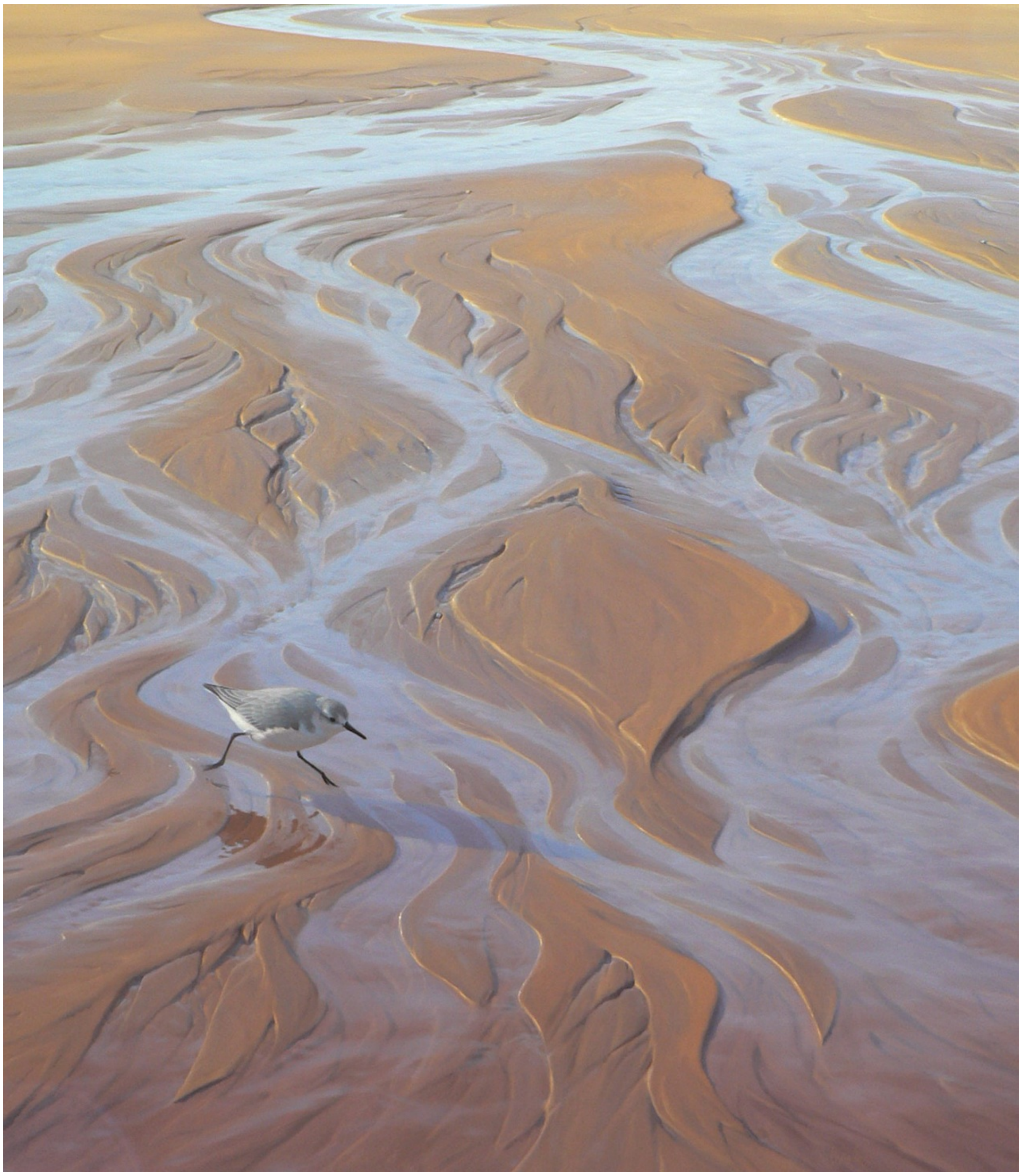


Tim Wootton: gulls, ducks and swan. Drawings from a sketchbook. The above compositions are drawn directly from the living birds, their arrangement placed on the paper just as they were seen in the field. There are many reasons why you, the artist, might feel the desire to draw individuals or a group of birds, but with analysis you will probably see that birds in nature regularly form the most beautifully balanced natural compositions. Drawing a collection of birds such as this can lead to the simplest yet visually rich results. Regardless of your aptitude for the task, looking at nature and attempting to sketch her designs is one of the purest reactions and

attempting to sketch her designs is one of the purest reactions and creatively satisfying experiences to be had.

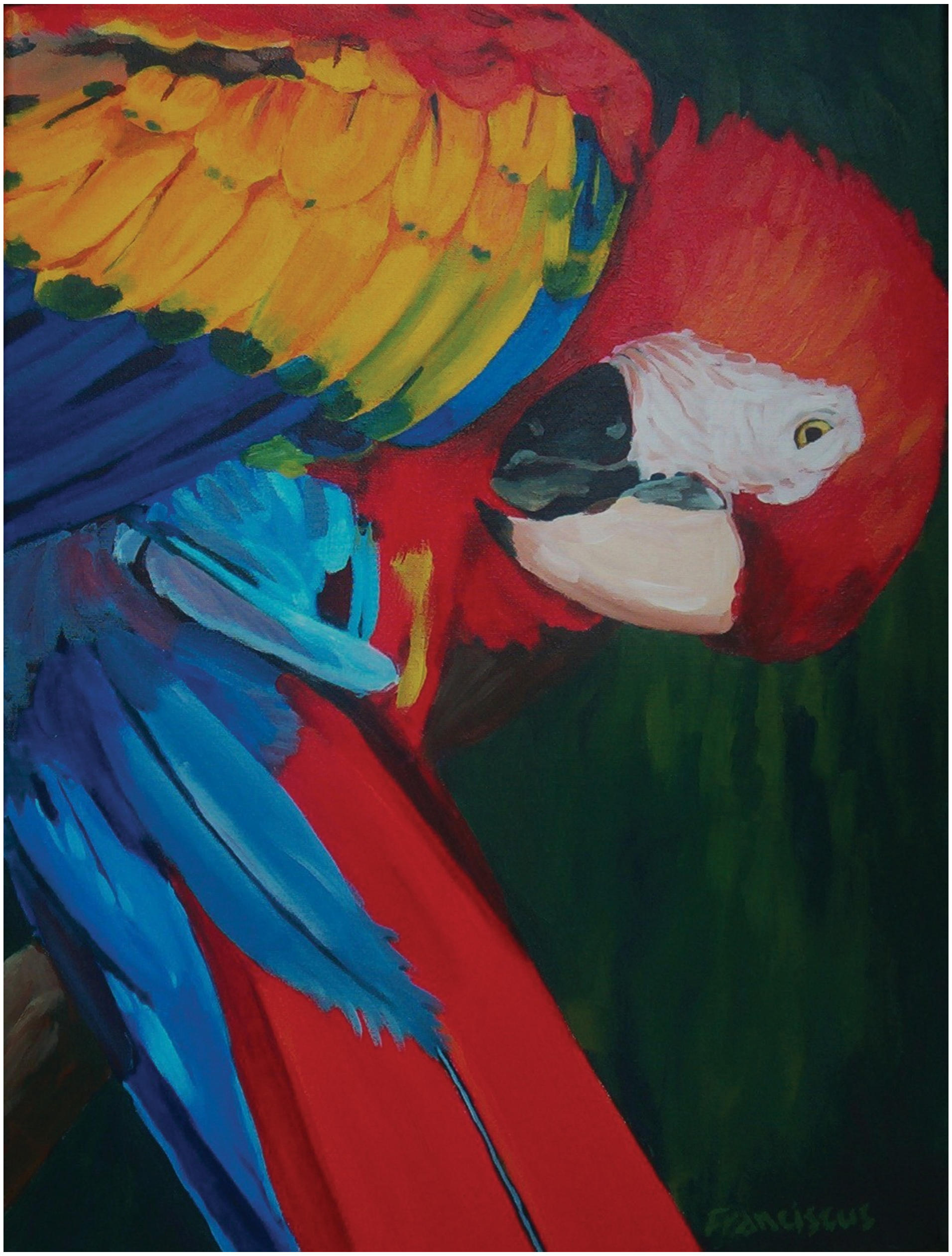
ZIG-ZAG AND ‘L’-SHAPED COMPOSITION

A zig-zag composition takes the eye into, across and through the picture. These types of composition can be used to describe depth in a painting. An ‘L’-shape composition creates a partial inner frame to the design and encourages the viewer to explore the positive shapes and the space that the L contains.



Here the artist, Chris Rose, has taken a very complex subject and has unified the running rivulets into a rhythmical and dynamic scene; the bird, a sanderling, is positioned entering the scene and has been left space in the scene to move through. Notice the artist has left the painting open where the bird is heading, allowing the viewer's eye to describe the path it is taking; the bird's shadow emphasizes the direction of travel.

As a rule of thumb, when painting landscapes or any scene in which you are trying to create the illusion of depth, remember that colours become less saturated the further away they are (darks become paler and whites darken); there is more contrast in the foreground (the darkest darks and lightest lights); and colours will tend towards the blue end of the spectrum the further away they are. Clouds are subject to the same rules of perspective as trees, hills and sheep – look at them in real life and you'll see the perspective.

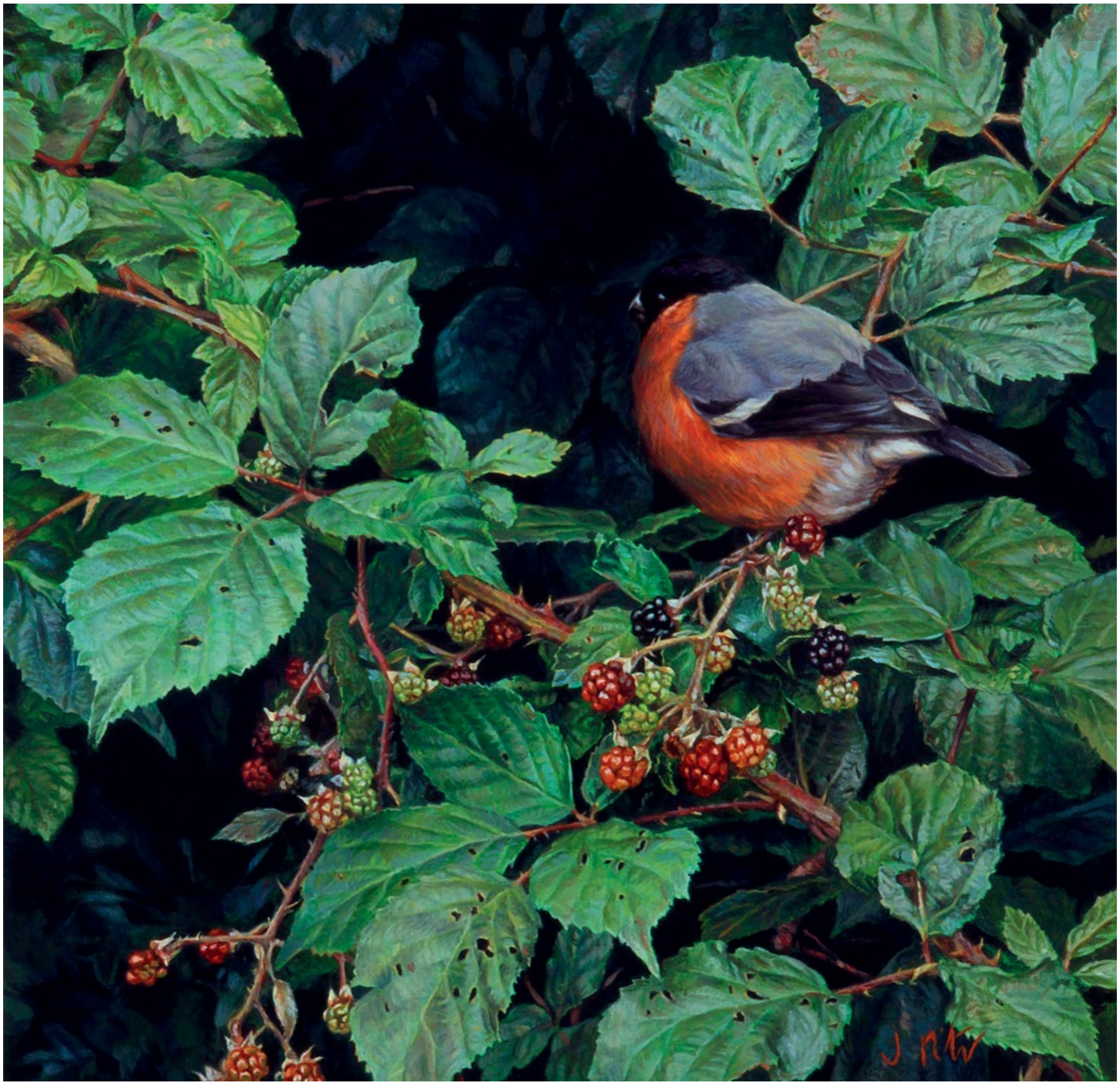


Frank van Boxtel: parrot. This strong image brings the viewer into the scene from the bottom of the frame, up and round the bird's

the scene from the bottom of the frame, up and round the bird's form to settle on the focal point, the tip of the preening bill. There's a very close and intimate feeling to this painting, as we are allowed to share the macaw's gentle activity.

VALUE COMPOSITION

Value (or tone) is an aspect of picture-making that can be overlooked. The key of a painting can be described as high or low, high-key paintings having predominantly light greys or light colours, low-key being at the opposite end of the scale. Within the key of a painting, it doesn't take much of a value change for a marked visual effect. For instance, in a low-key painting (where much of the work is in dark, sombre greys and colours) a mid-to high-range grey will dazzle like a light – the point being balance and contrast.

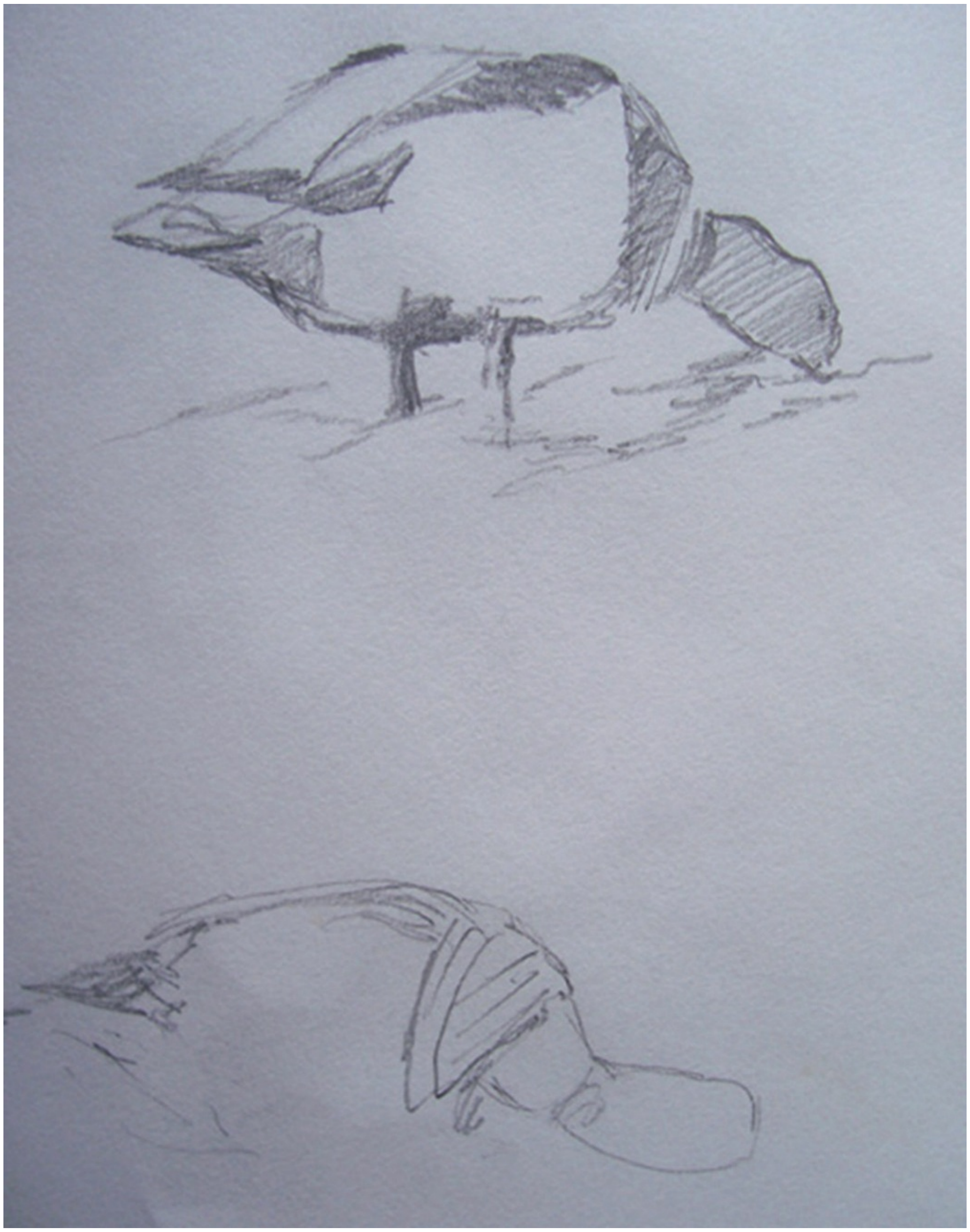


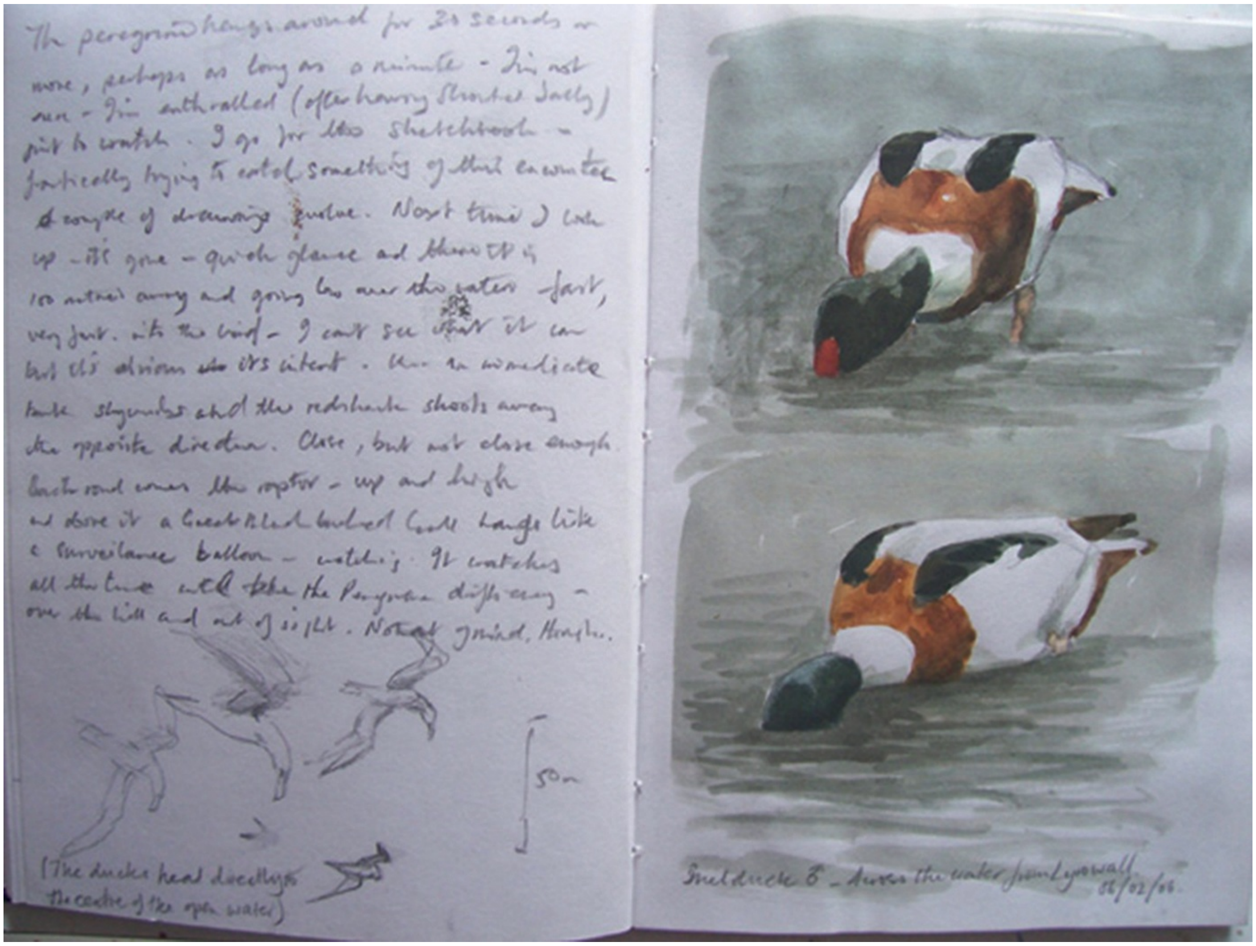
Jonathan Pointer: bullfinch and brambles. A cleverly selected palette with the blues of the bird's back very subtly echoed in the reflective surfaces of the bramble leaves – the blacks and reddish hues repeat in the berries and the bullfinch. Bright colours are controlled and harmonized through delicate replication.

COLOUR COMPOSITION

Colour in a painting has many properties, as have the ways in which it is applied. Try working out a colour composition using the ‘most, some, and a bit’ rule to colour and value. The painting below follows this principle, having almost all greens (most), the blue-greys found in the bullfinch’s back and in the reflected light on the foliage (some) and, as a counterpoint to these understated and cool colours, the reds found in the bird’s breast and a few unripe blackberries (a bit).

The following sequence shows a selection of the stages of a painting of shelduck, from initial field sketches and notes on colour and habit, through the ‘work in progress’ to the final painting.

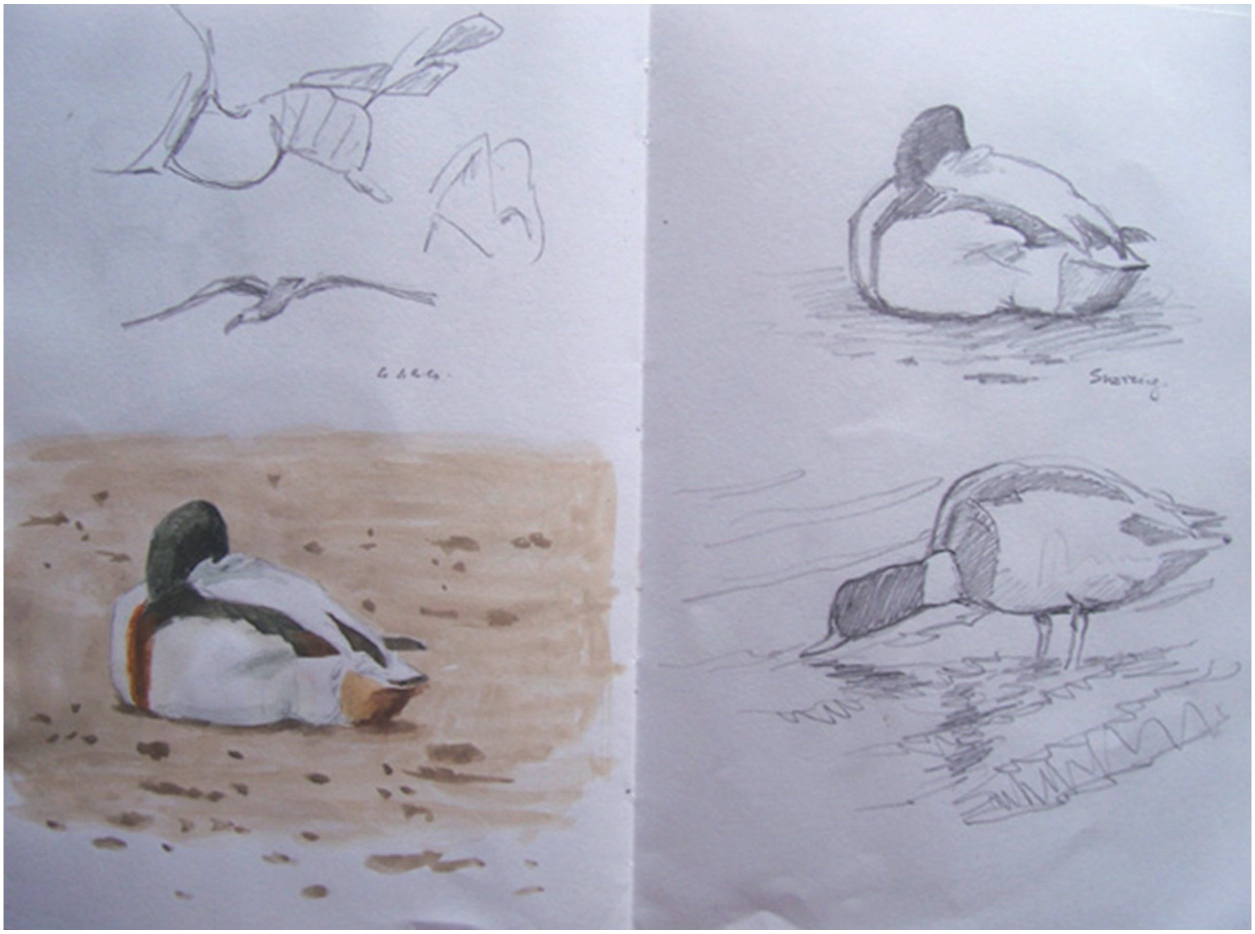


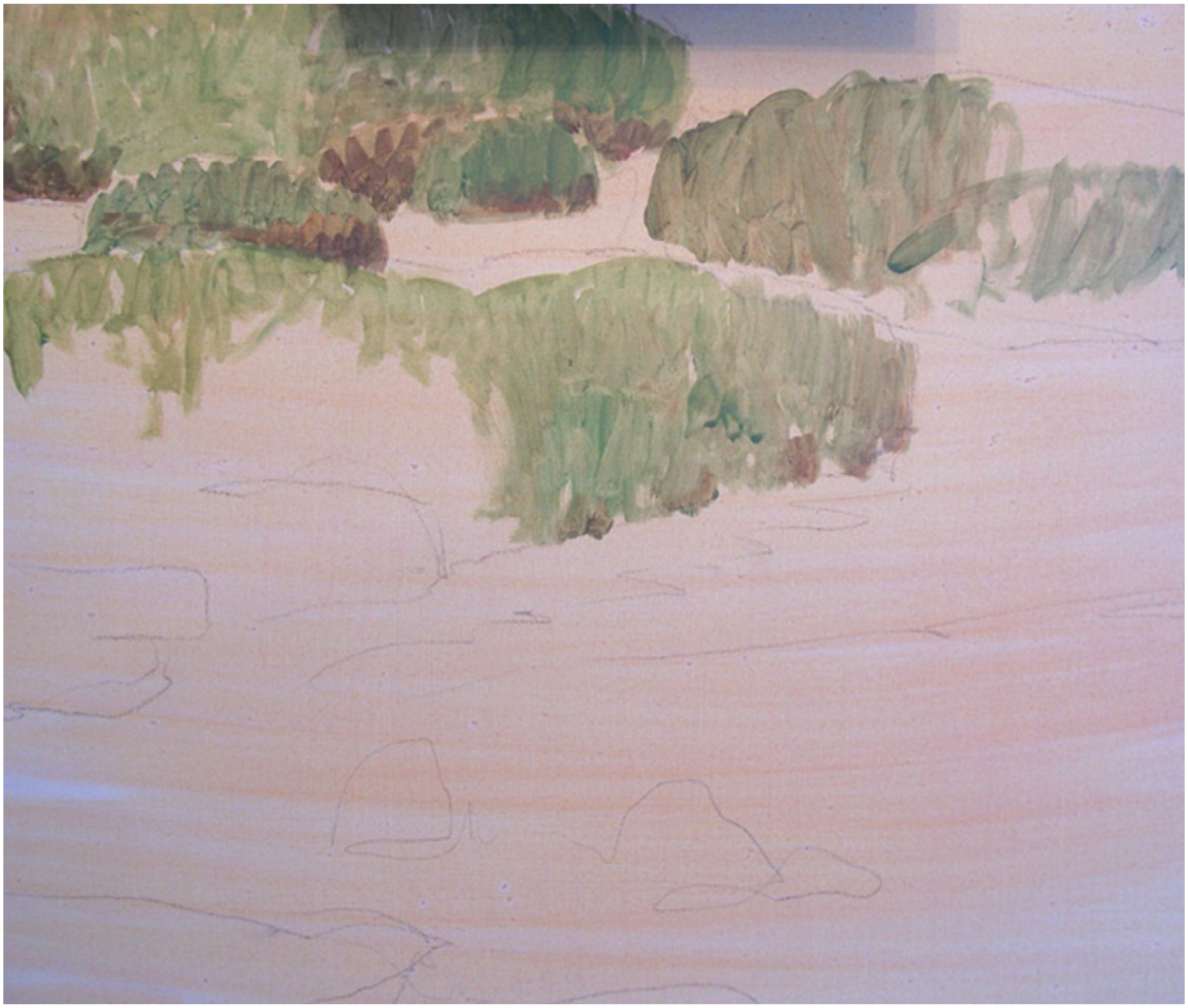


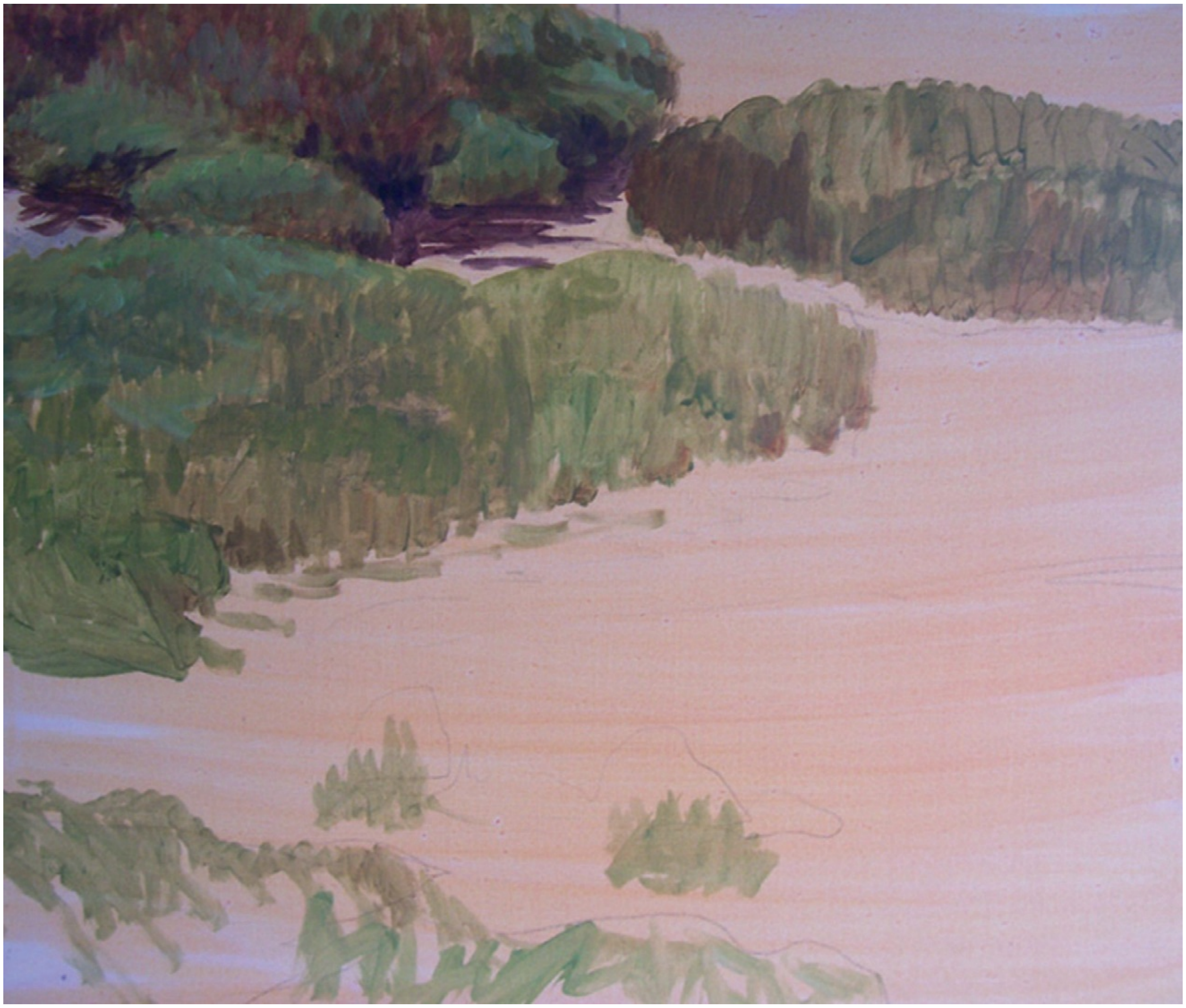
The peregrine hangs around for 30 seconds or more, perhaps as long as a minute – I'm not sure – I'm enthralled (after having [illegible]) just to watch. I go for the sketchbook – frantically trying to catch something of that encounter. A couple of drawings [illegible] value. Next time I look up – it's gone – quick glance and there it is 100 metres away and going low over the water – fast, very fast. into the wind – I can't see what it can but it's obvious ~~wh~~ it's intent. then an immediate take skywards and the redshank shoots away the opposite direction. Close, but not close enough. Back round comes the raptor – up and high and above it a Great Black-backed Gull hangs like a surveillance balloon – watching. It watches all the time until the Peregrine drifts away – over the hill and out of sight. Never mind, though.

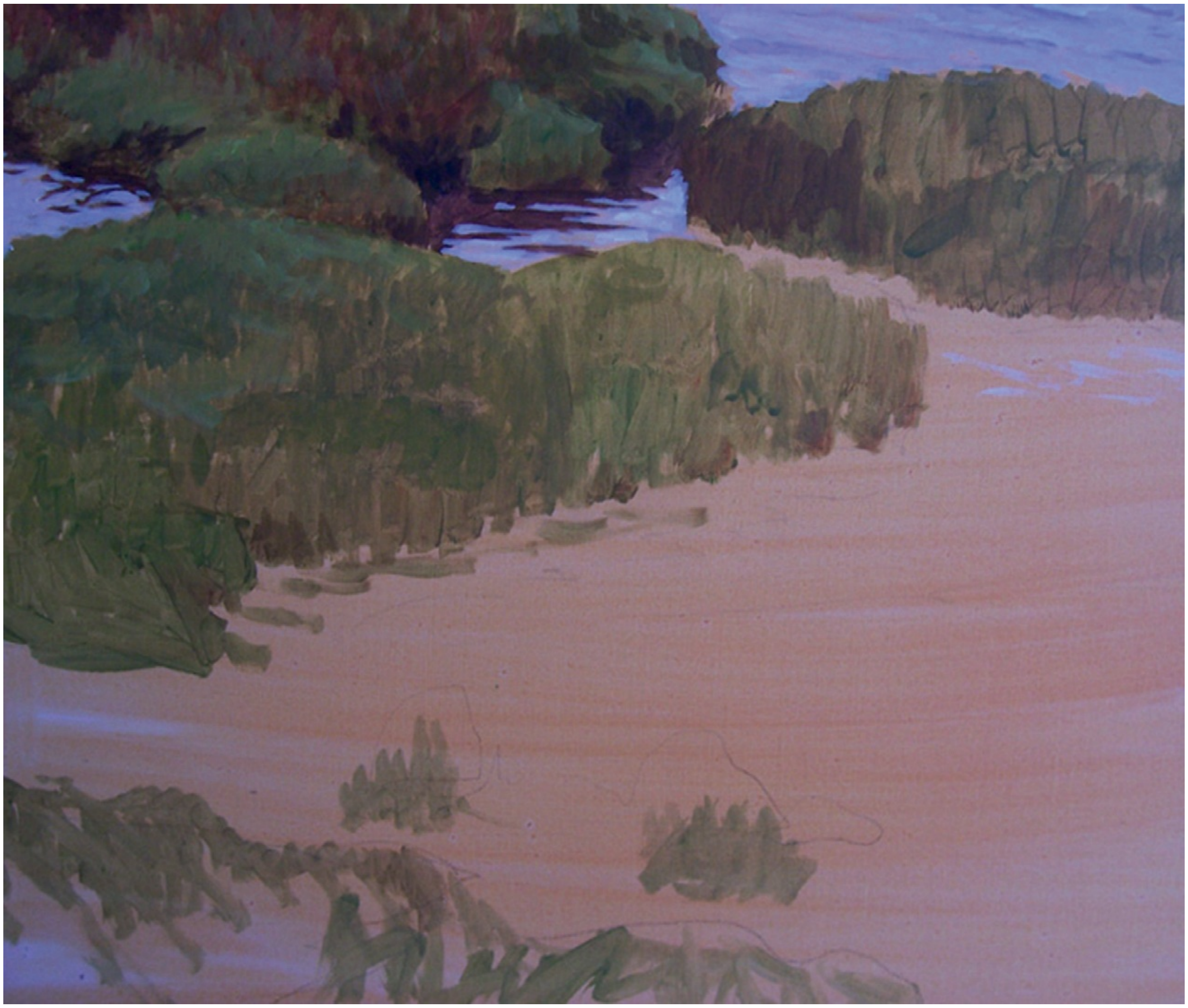
(The ducks head directly to the centre of the open water)

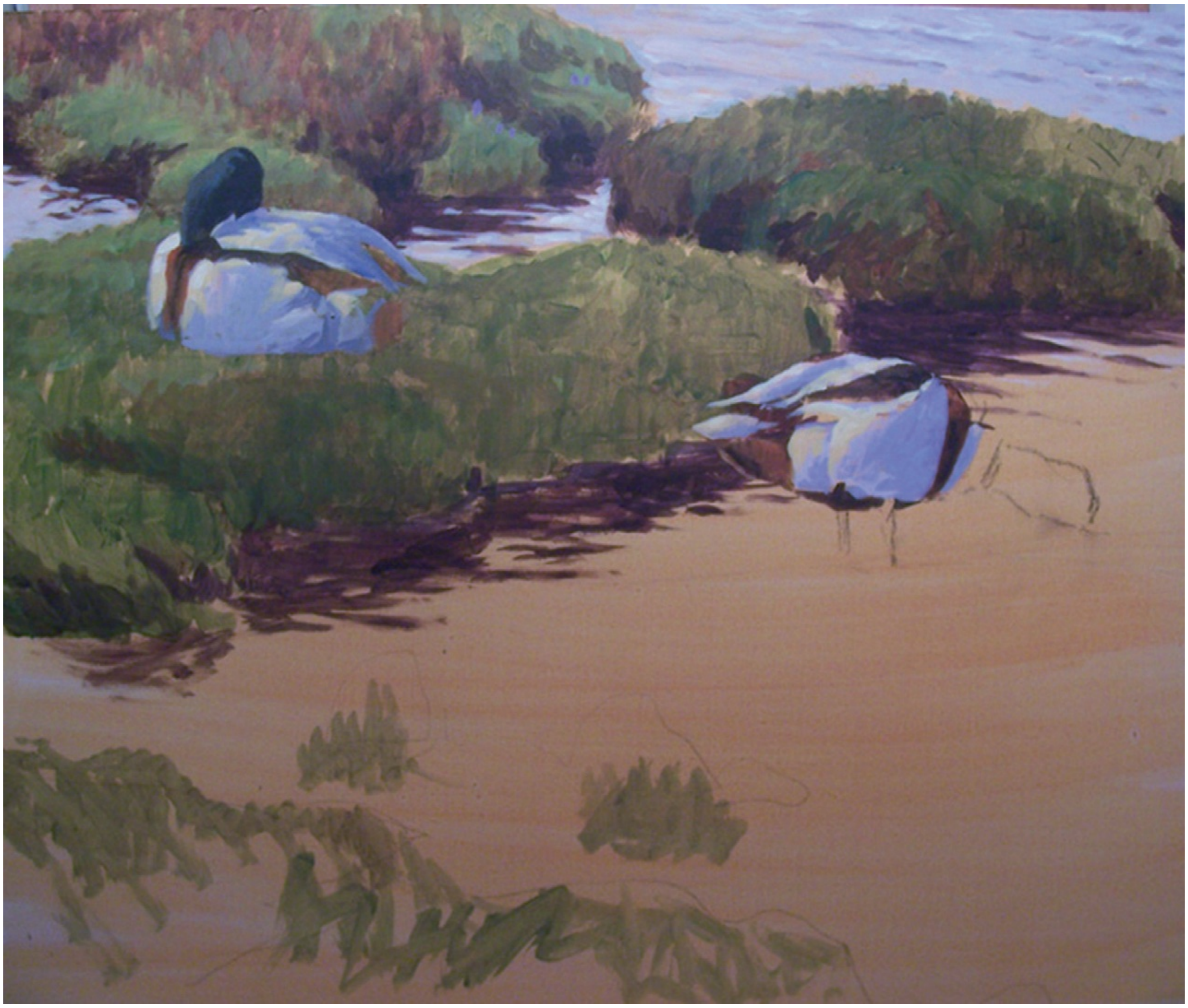
Shelduck ♂ – Across the water from Lynwall 06/02/06.

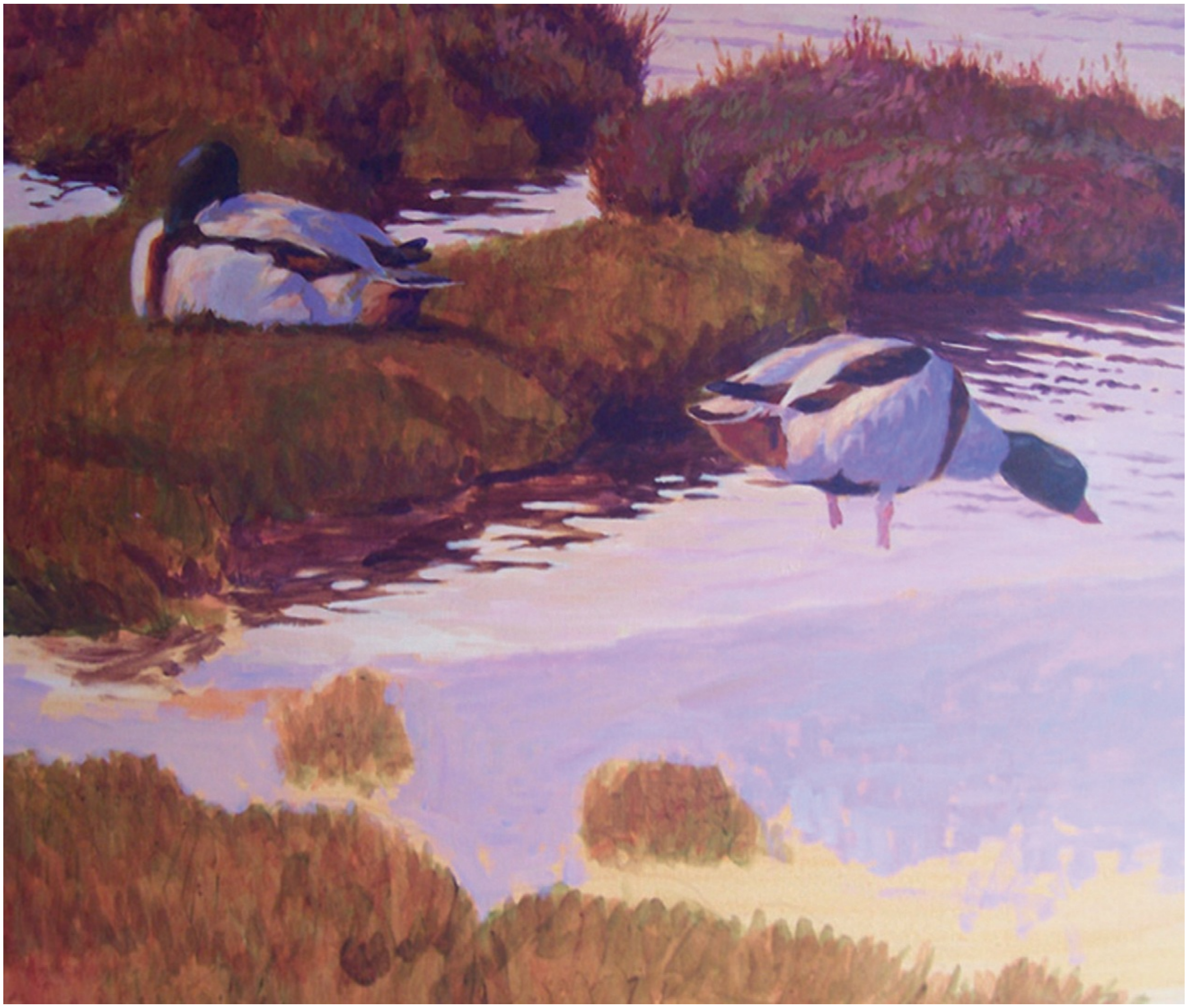

Gulls.

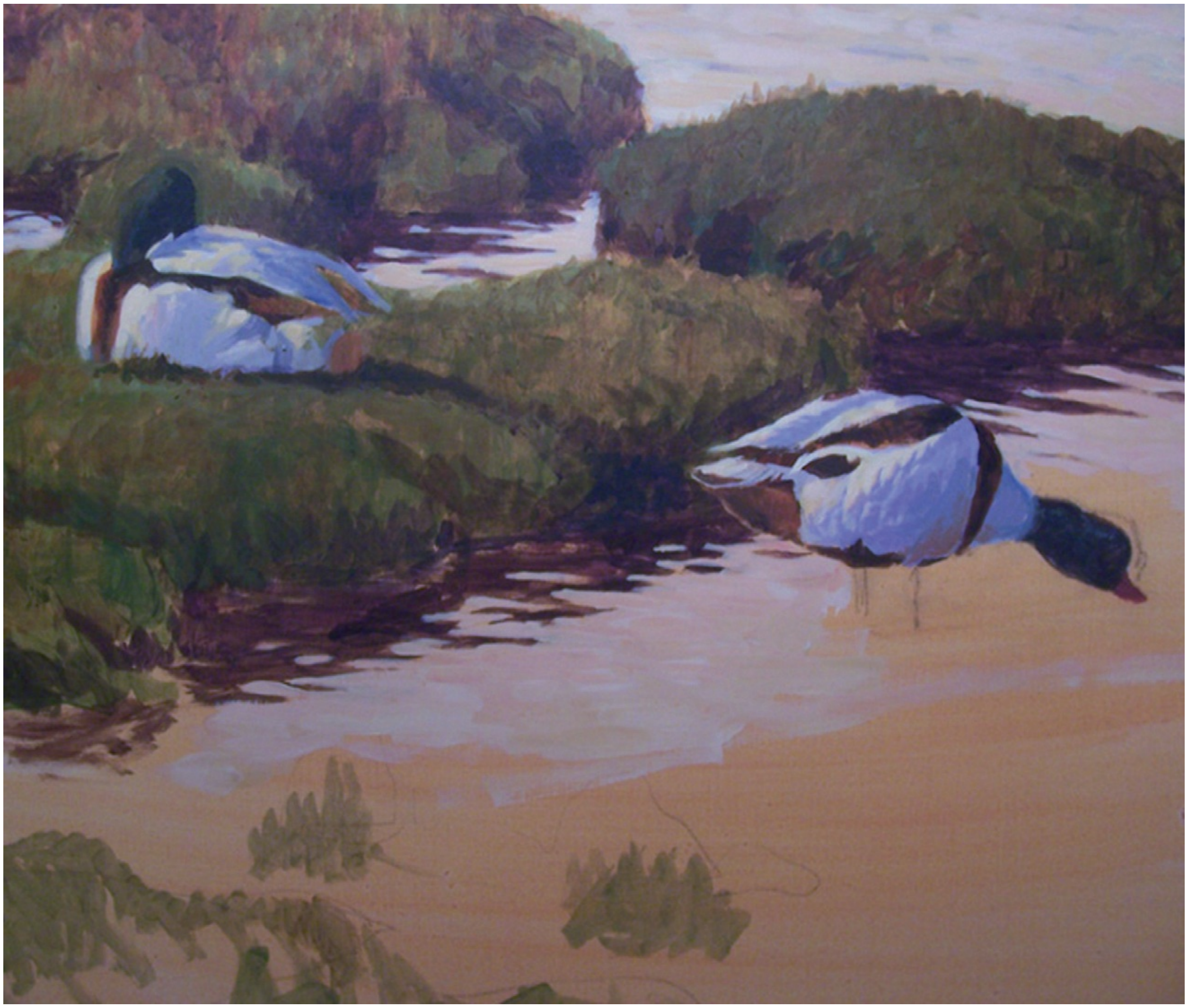


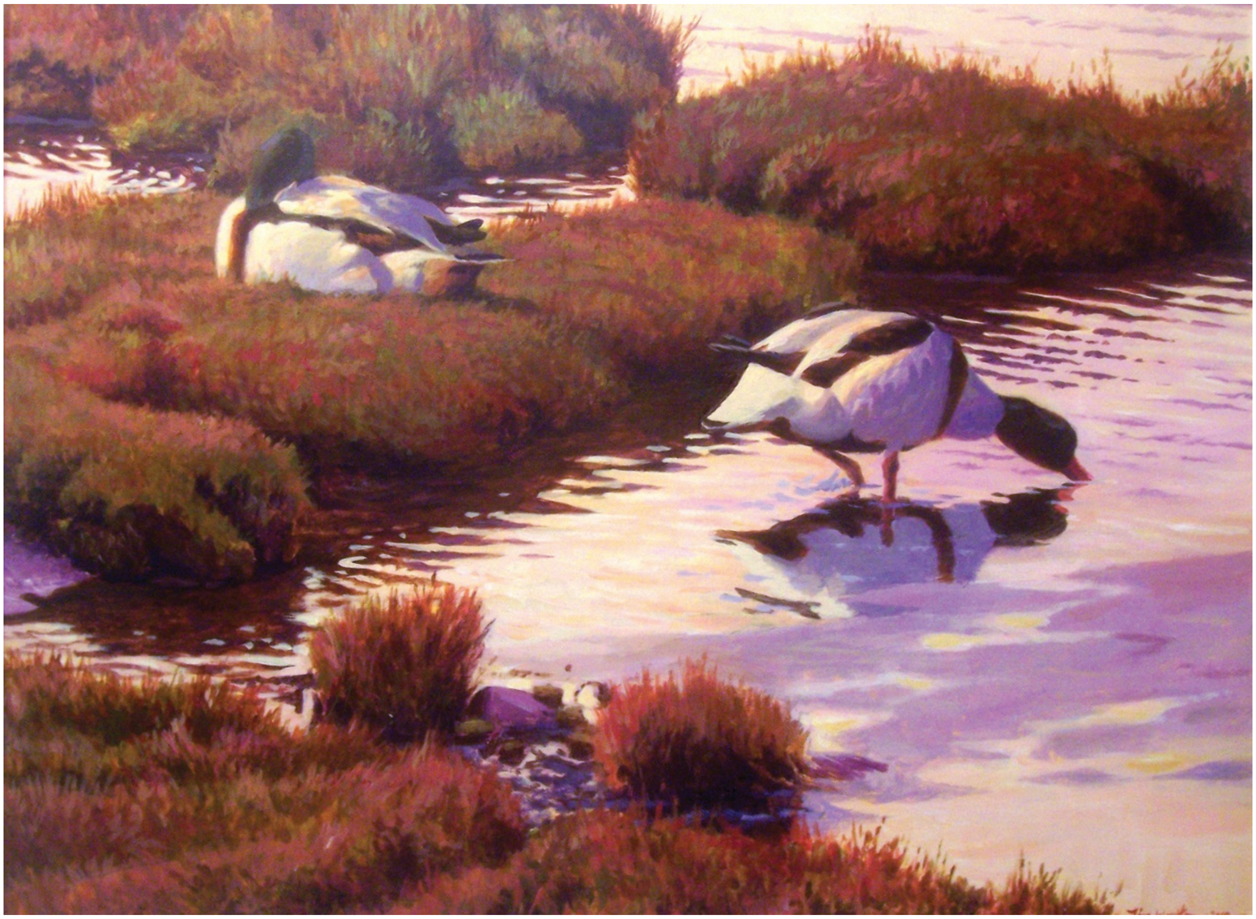








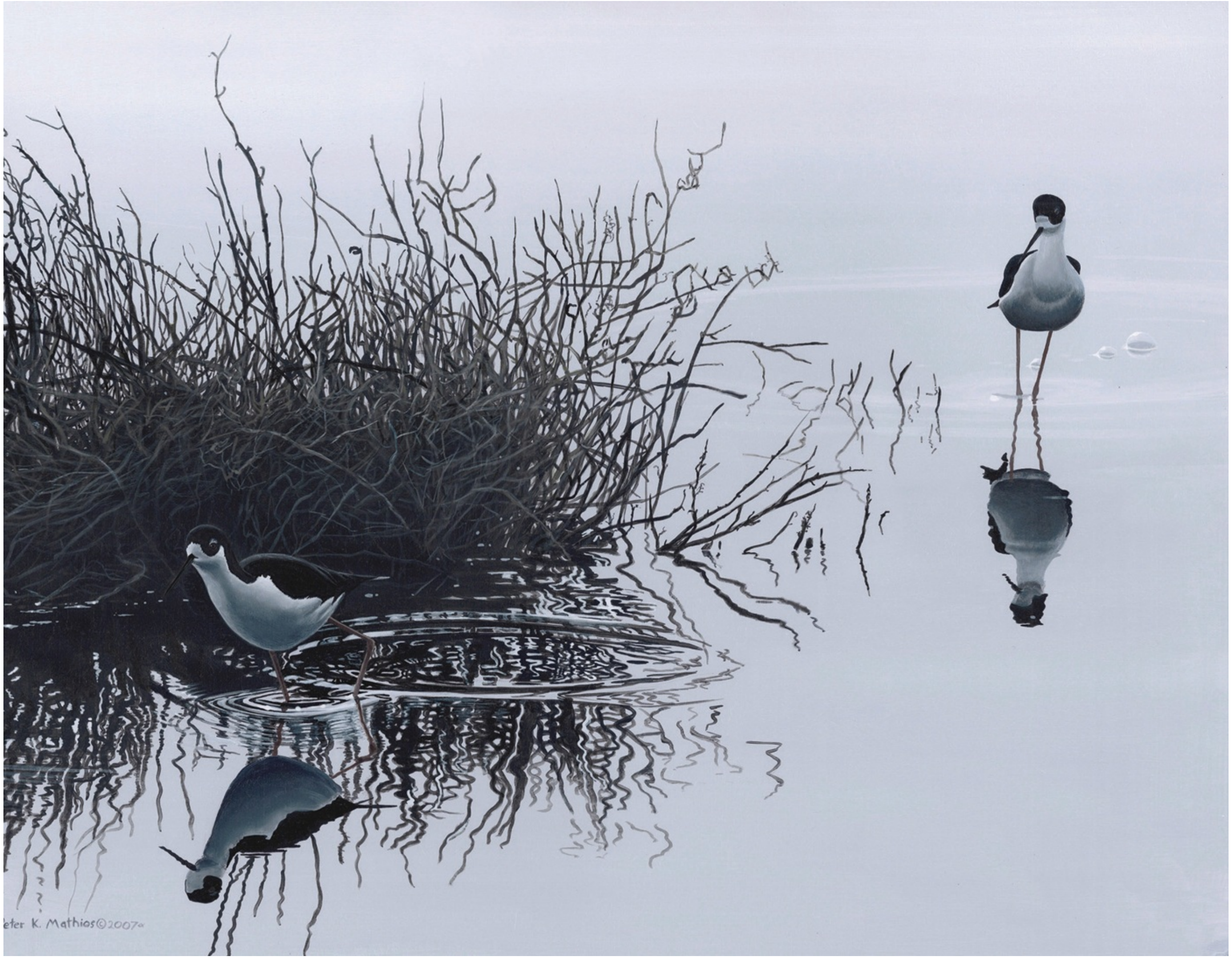




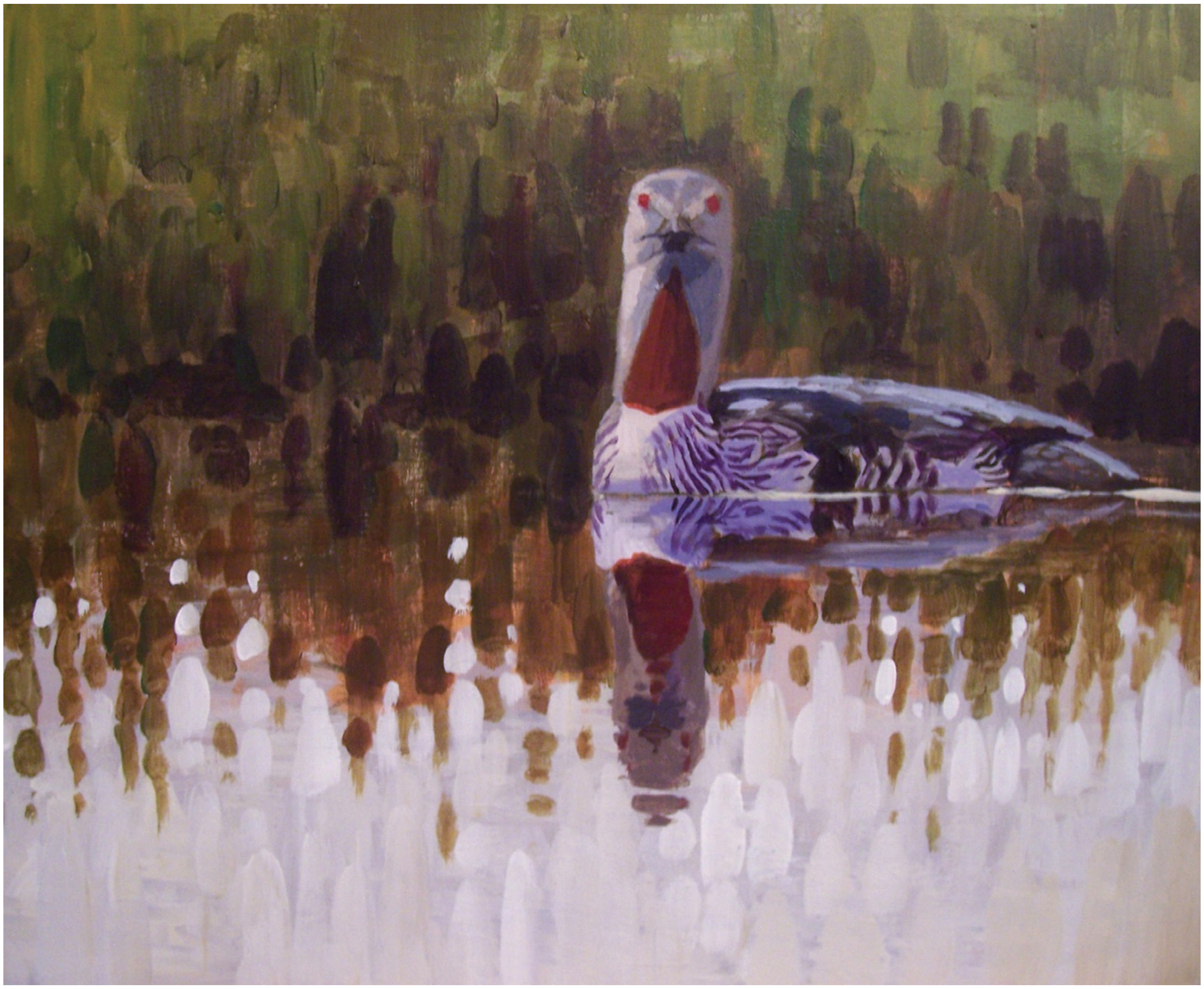
Tim Wootton: *Evening Light: Shelduck on the Oyce*. The top three images are from the sketchbook, drawn directly from life – investigating the forms of the birds at rest and moving. Stages 1 and 2: the first sketching in of the major shapes of the scene (called 'blocking in') – note the panel has been given a light wash of burnt sienna as a 'ground' for the painting. Stage 3: the second colour (pale mauve) is introduced. This will be a colour to bring the water areas together and will also feature in the shadows on the birds. Stages 4 and 5: the birds are placed *in situ*, more or less as they will be in the final version, and the water is sketched in. Stage 6: the critical point, where I found the colours in the birds, water and vegetation were jarring and my vision of the late evening light wasn't apparent, so I mixed a thin wash of burnt sienna and painted over the whole scene. This had the effect of killing off the jarring greens and emphasizing the reddish/ochre hues. Stage 7: the finished version. I have reassessed the birds, introduced the foreground detail, accentuated the reflections and worked on the

exposed muddy patch. Essentially there are now only three major hues in the whole painting and the scene is colour balanced and more sympathetic to my original idea. The overall structure of the composition is in a ‘Z’ design, which leads the viewer into the scene and back around via the two birds, the eye moving in a figure of eight.

DEALING WITH WATER



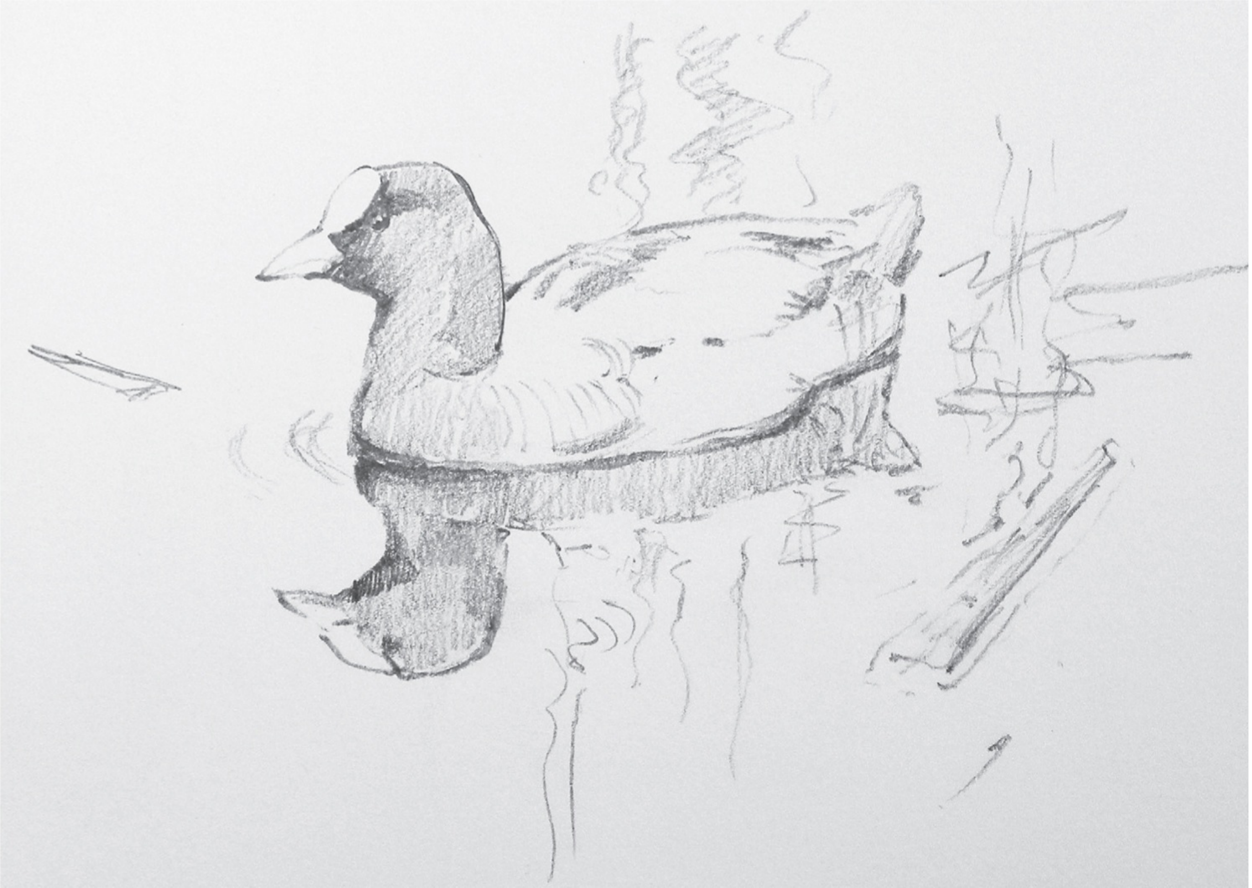
Peter Mathios: stilts.



Tim Wootton: red-throated diver.

Reflections and shadows are subtle yet essential aspects of any drawing and their association with the subject is inherent. Although both relate intrinsically to the subject, the fundamental difference between the two could be described as follows: a shadow will be directly opposite the light source of the illuminated object and will follow the contours of any surface on which it is projected; a reflection inhabits the space below its object.

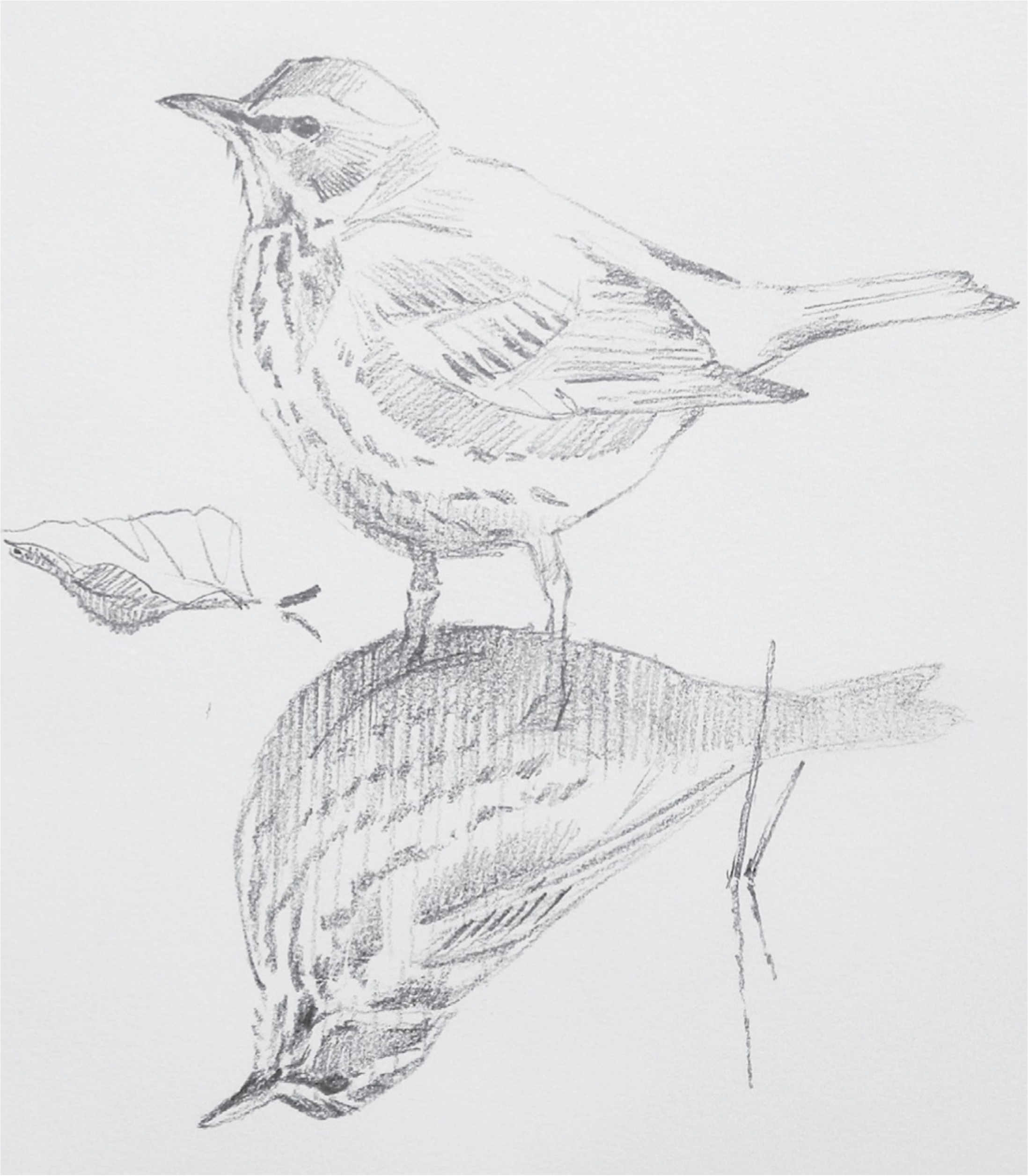
A reflection behaves in much the same way as the threedimensional object with which it is associated in that its properties alter in relation to the angle of view and subtleties of lighting. When seen from a flat angle (in good light and calm conditions) a bird’s reflection can appear almost like an inverted representation of the creature – a mirror image, if you like. The reflection alters critically in relation to your angle of view, to the point that were you to view a swimming duck from directly above, there would be little or no visible reflection at all. A bird seen from a distance, standing on a protruding rock, would have a correspondingly deep reflection.



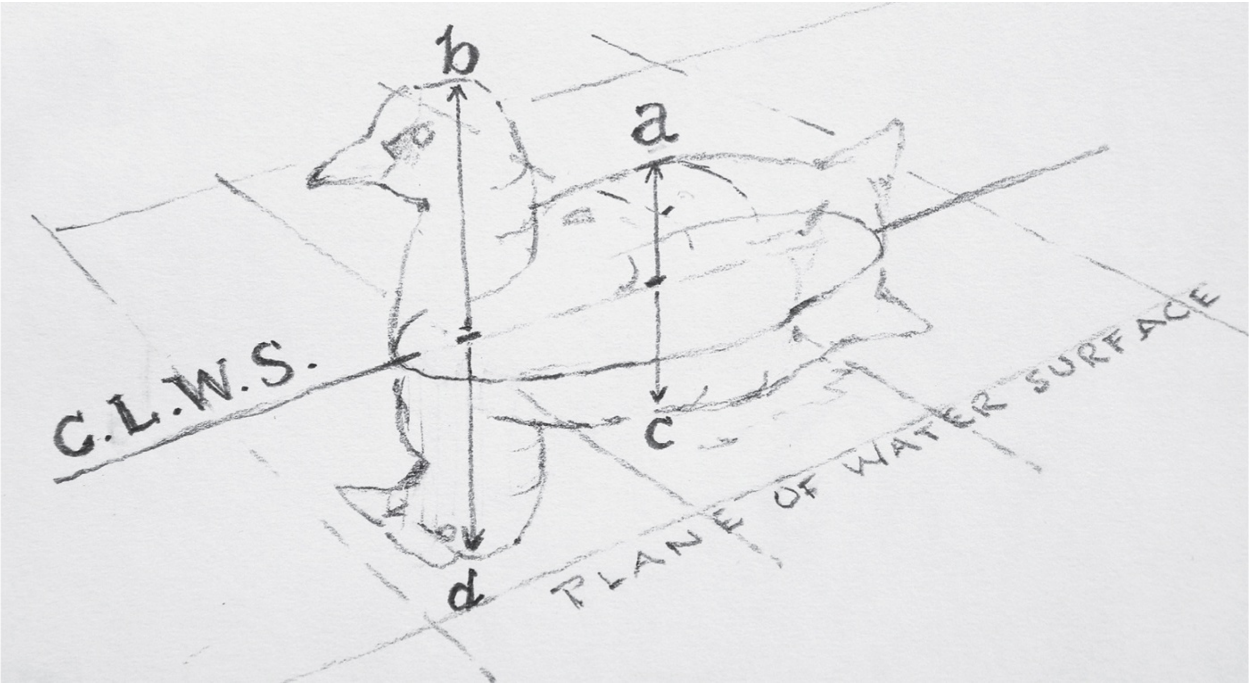
Tim Wootton: coot with its reflection.

Because the bird is viewed from an elevated angle, its reflection shows more of its underside. In this scenario, the reflection is also likely to be considerably darker than the local tone of the bird, being in shadow. The drawing of a redwing (right) shows how much of the underside of the bird can be seen in the reflection when viewed from height, and how much of the reflection is in shadow. A reflection may be imagined as though you were a fish underwater looking through the water at the bird. The angle of elevation affects the amount of underside and perspective visible.

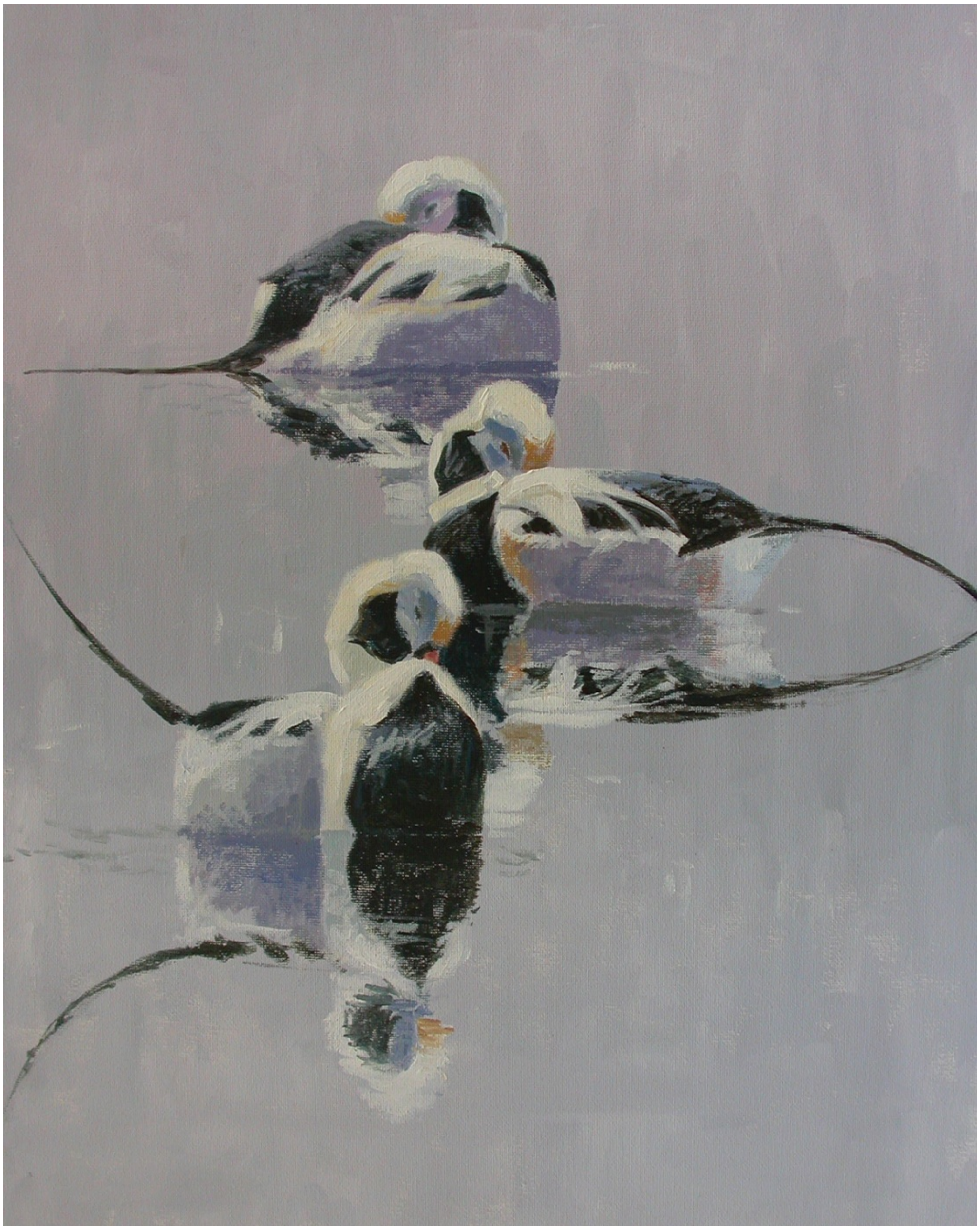
The higher your elevation in relation to the subject, the steeper will be the angle of reflection. There are some very exciting possibilities for using reflections in designs. Occasionally when in the field, a bird may only reveal itself when it moves and this can be all the more peculiar when the observation is not of the bird, but actually its reflection, as the bird itself remains hidden from view.



Tim Wootton: redwing.

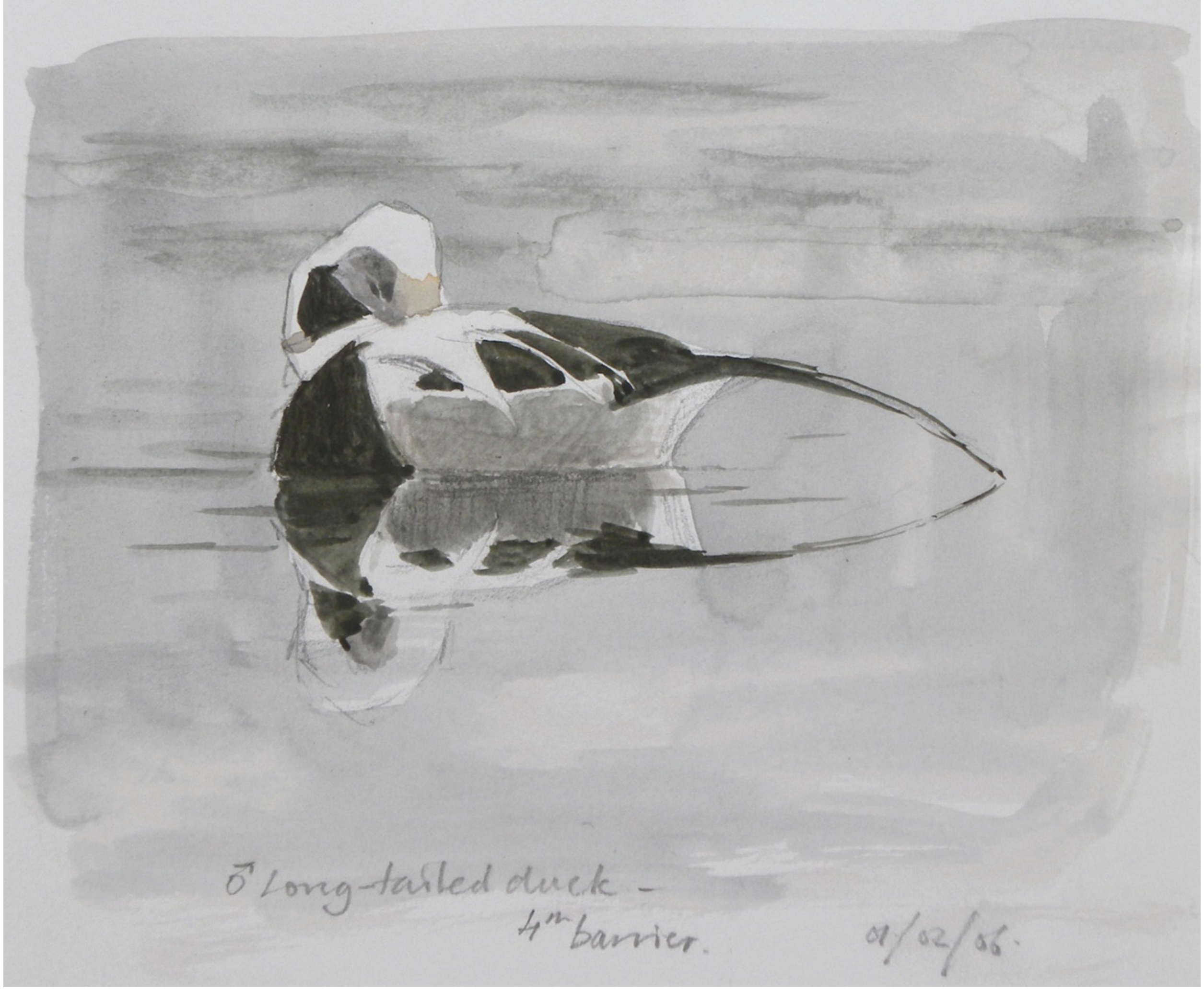


Tim Wootton: coot reflection. The calculations are along these lines: (a) is the perpendicular height of the coot's back (above waterline); (b) is the height of the head; (c) and (d) are the relative depths of the reflection. You'll notice that the reflection corresponds directly to the structure. C.L.W.S. is the centre line of the water surface and delineates water level across the bird.

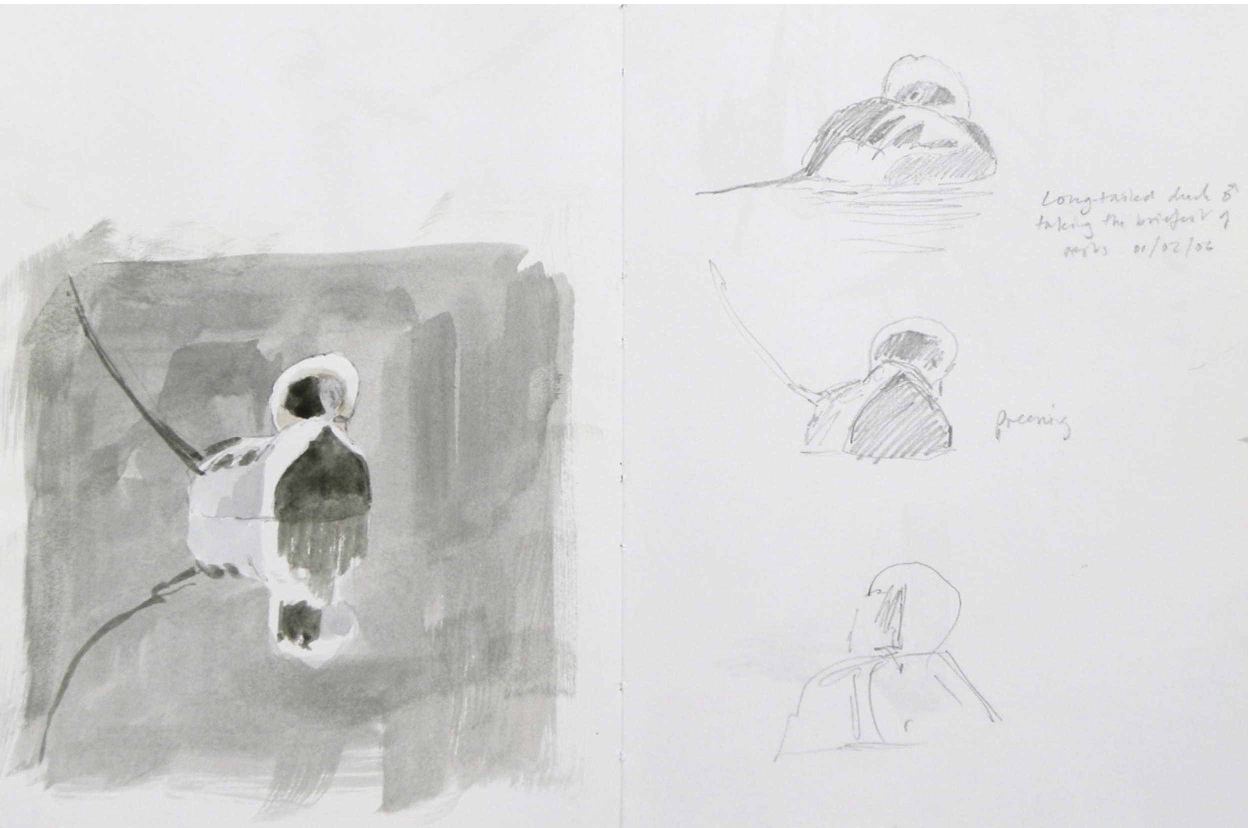


Tim Wootton: *A Lad's Life*. This painting of three long-tailed drakes in their winter finery relies on the interlinking darks and lights as the main part of the composition; the reflections play a strong role in the overall balance of the piece.

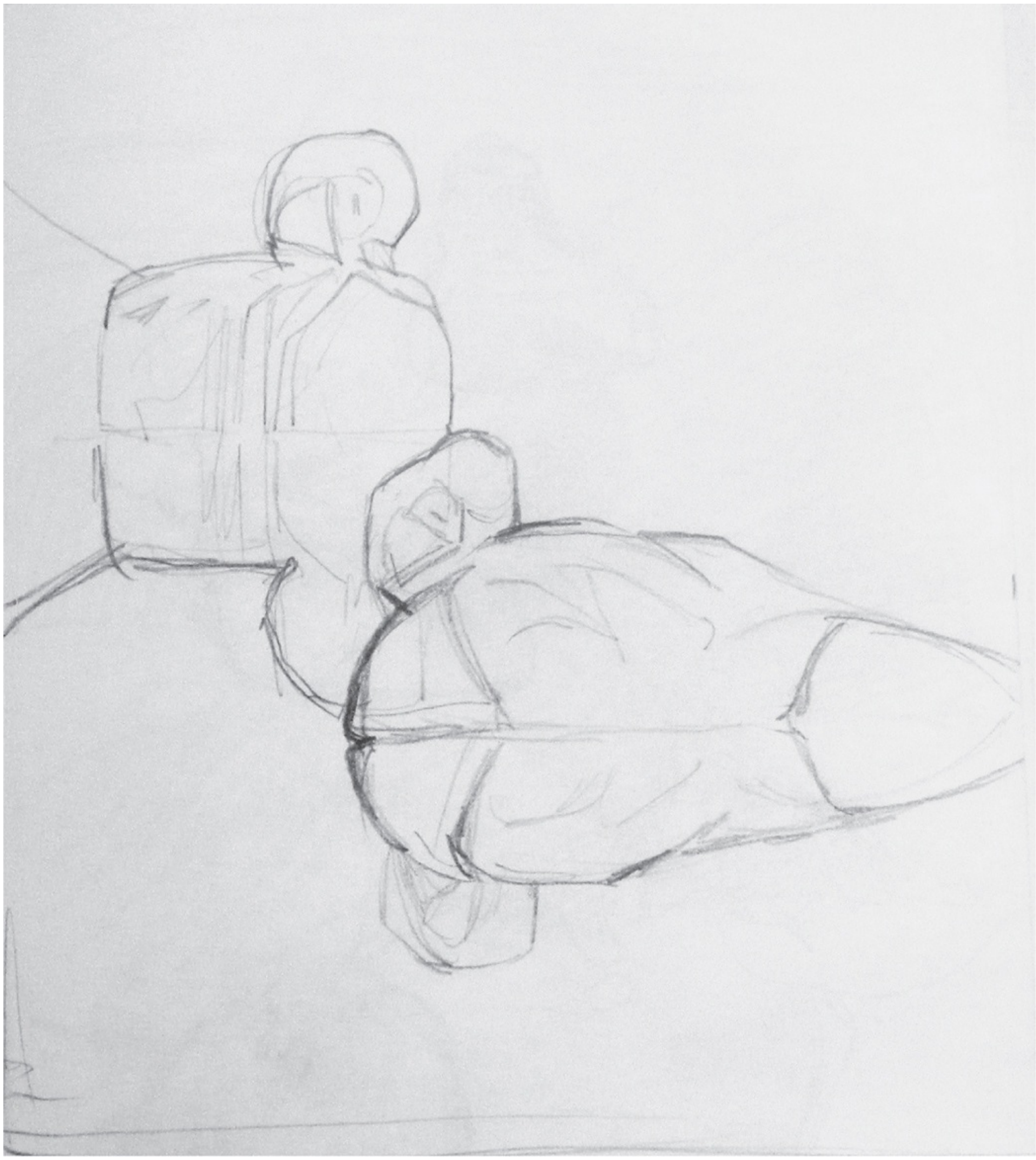
The stages leading to the final composition of *A Lad's Life* are shown here.

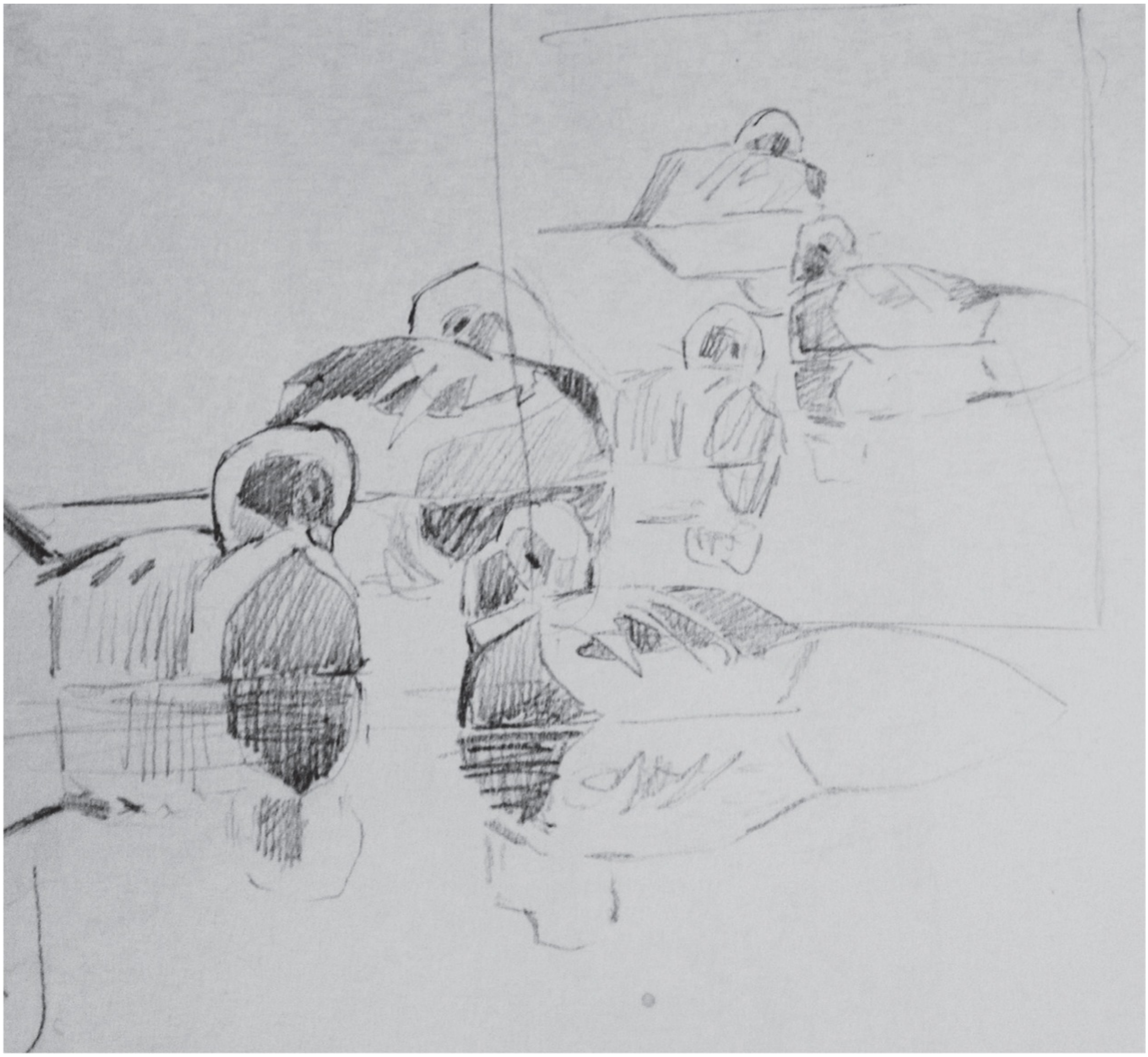


♂ Long-tailed duck -
4th barrier.
01/02/06.

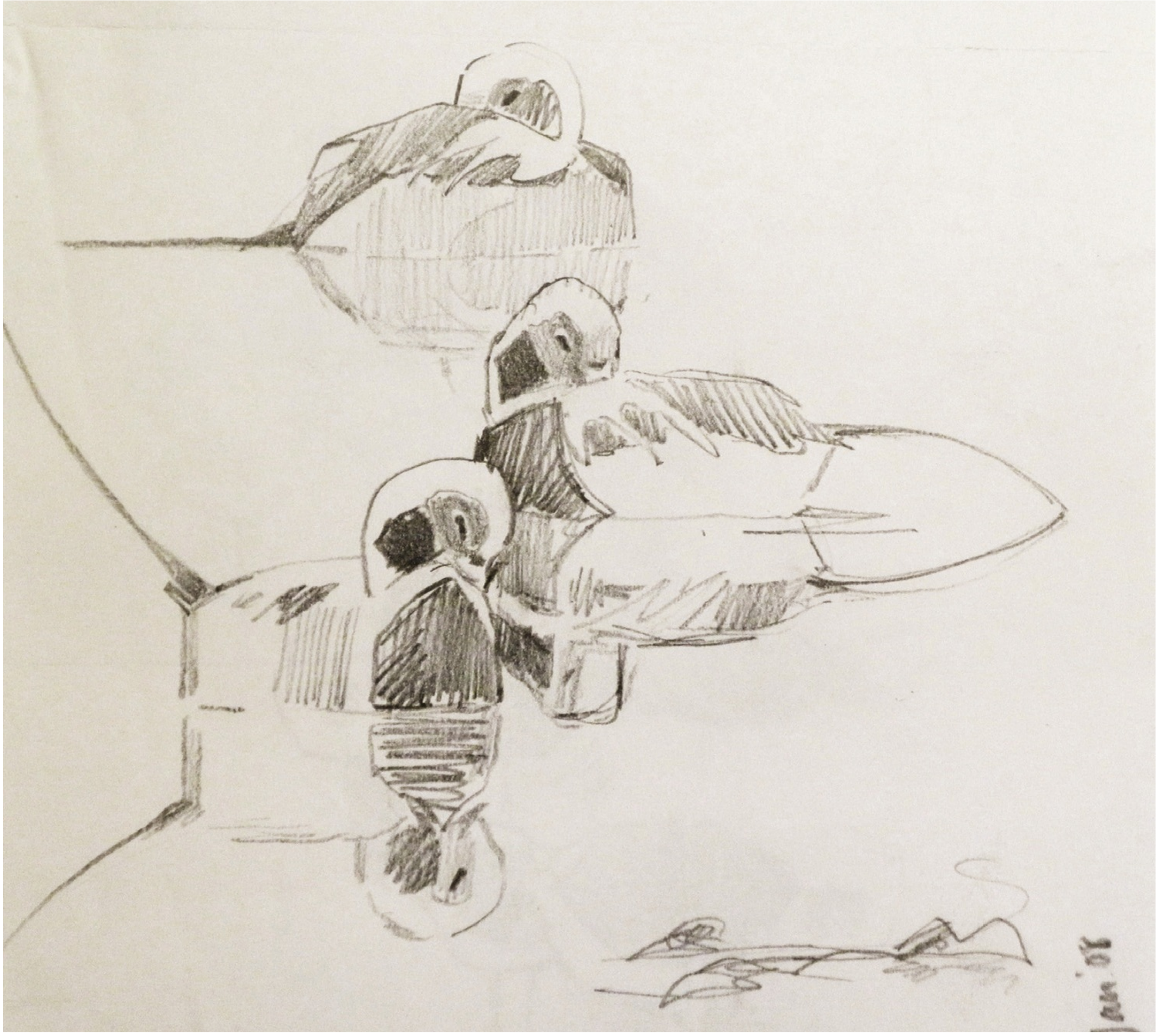

Long-tailed duck ♂
taking the briefest of
naps 01/02/06
preening

Field drawings in the sketchbook with notes on colour.

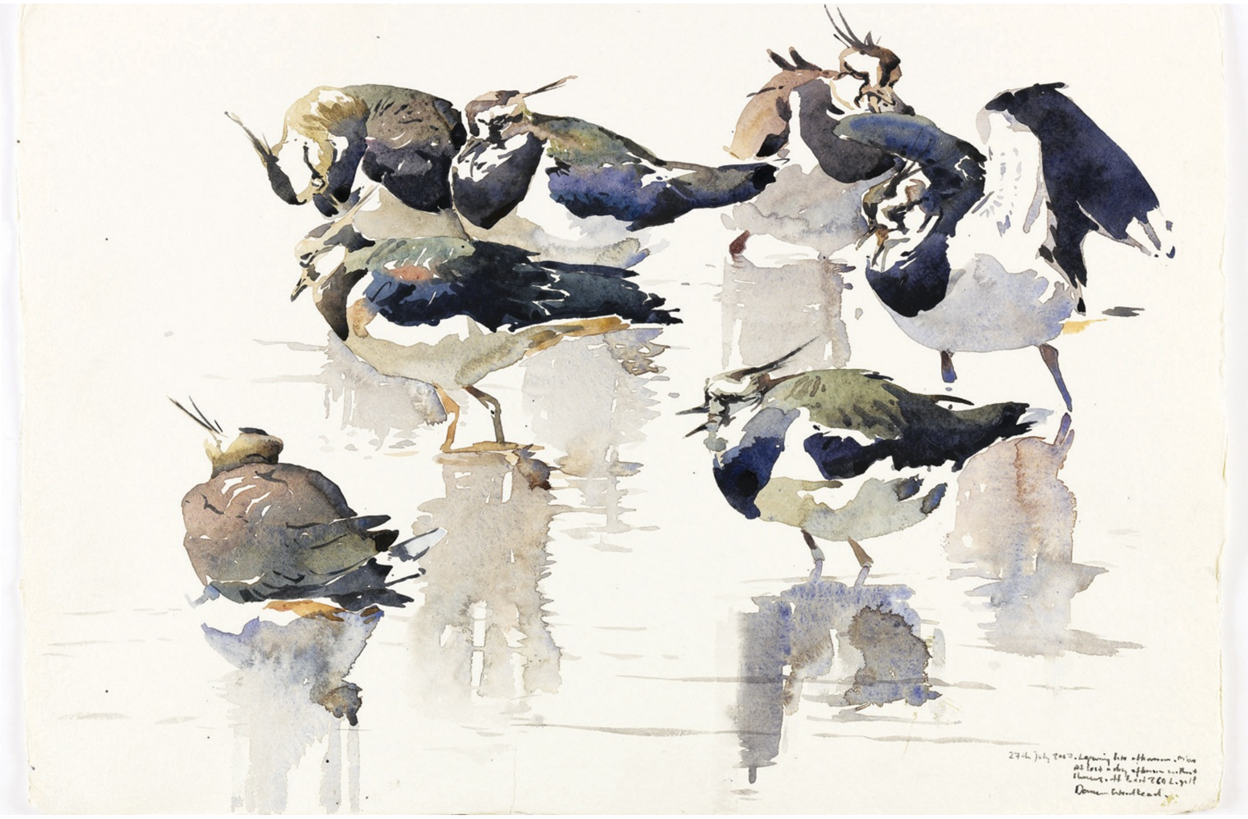




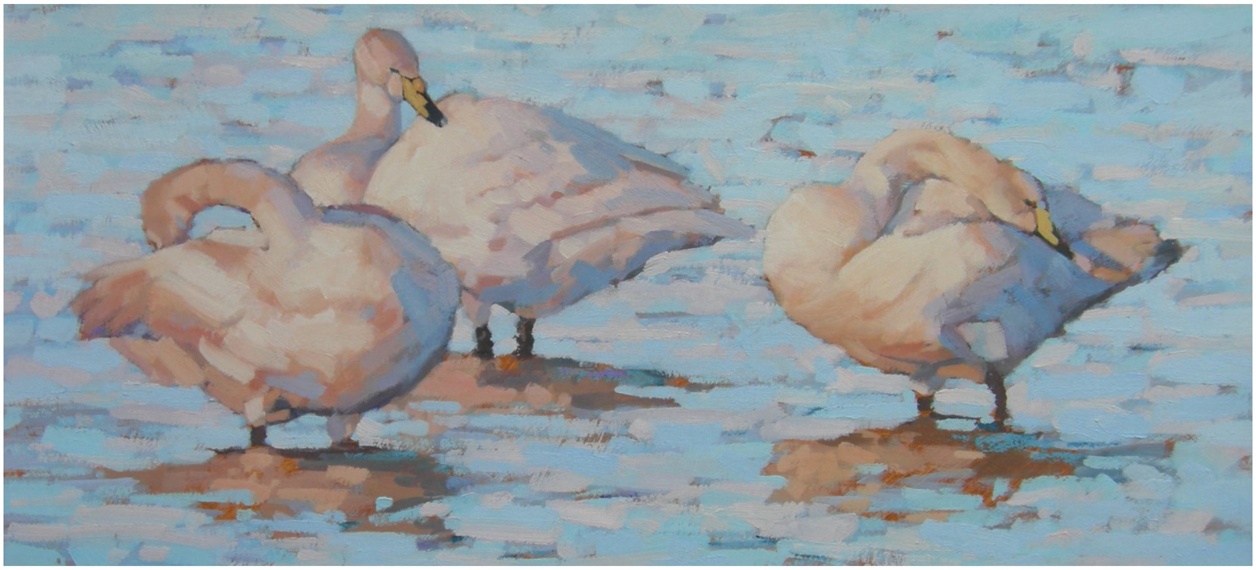
The original composition had just the two birds. I then played around with the design by adding a third bird – the original drawing for which is a tiny pencil sketch on the second sheet of field drawings above.



Finally I changed the angle to a higher viewpoint and placed the birds one behind the other so they stacked upwards. This gave me the opportunity to interconnect the reflections more, as in the finished painting.

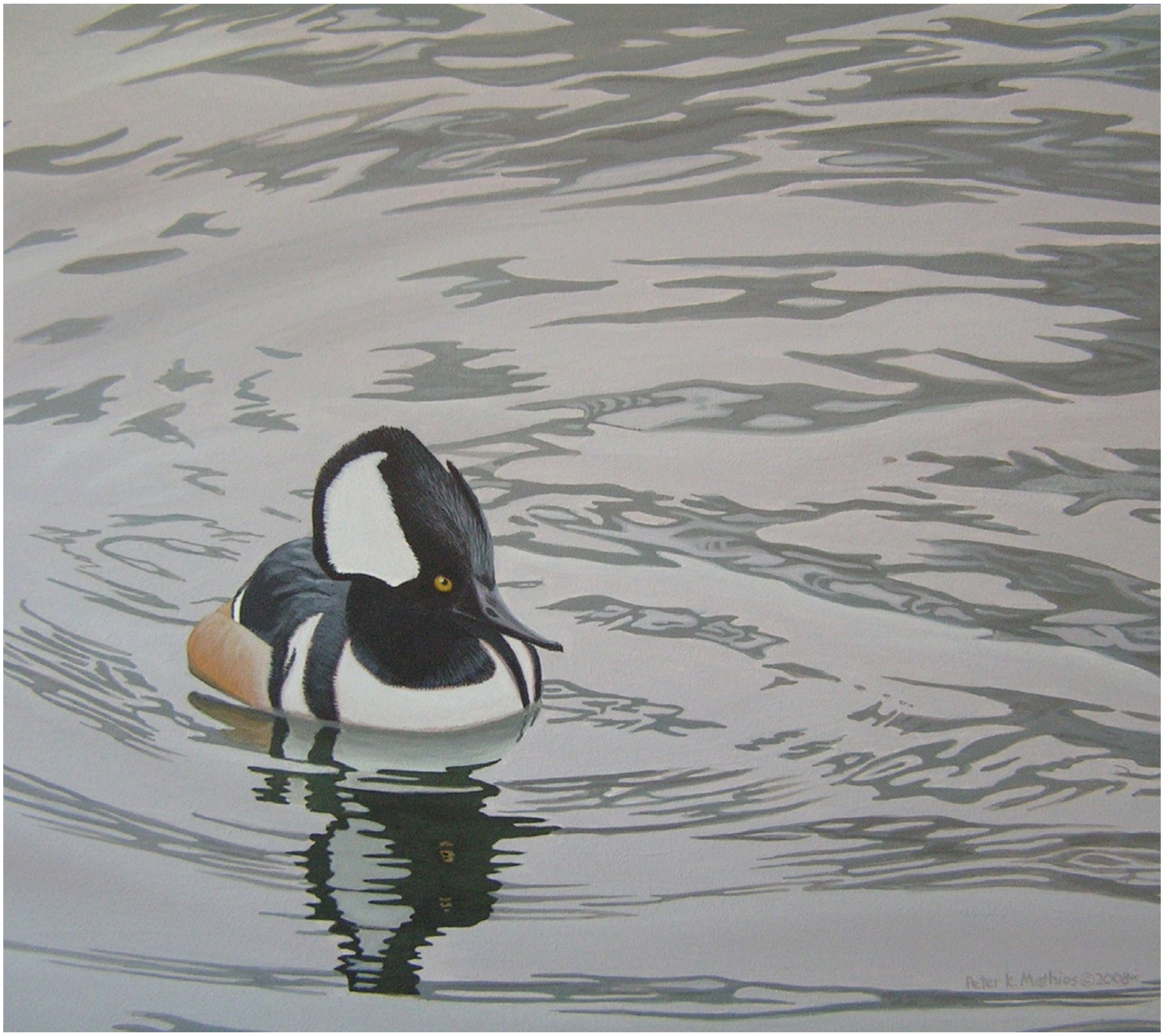

27th July 2007. Lapwing late afternoon.
At last a dry afternoon without
showers. At least 260 Lapwing!
Darren Woodhead

Darren Woodhead: *Lapwings Reflected*. The habitat, suggested in a minimalist fashion, places these birds in context; the silver water allows the strong shapes of the birds to dominate.

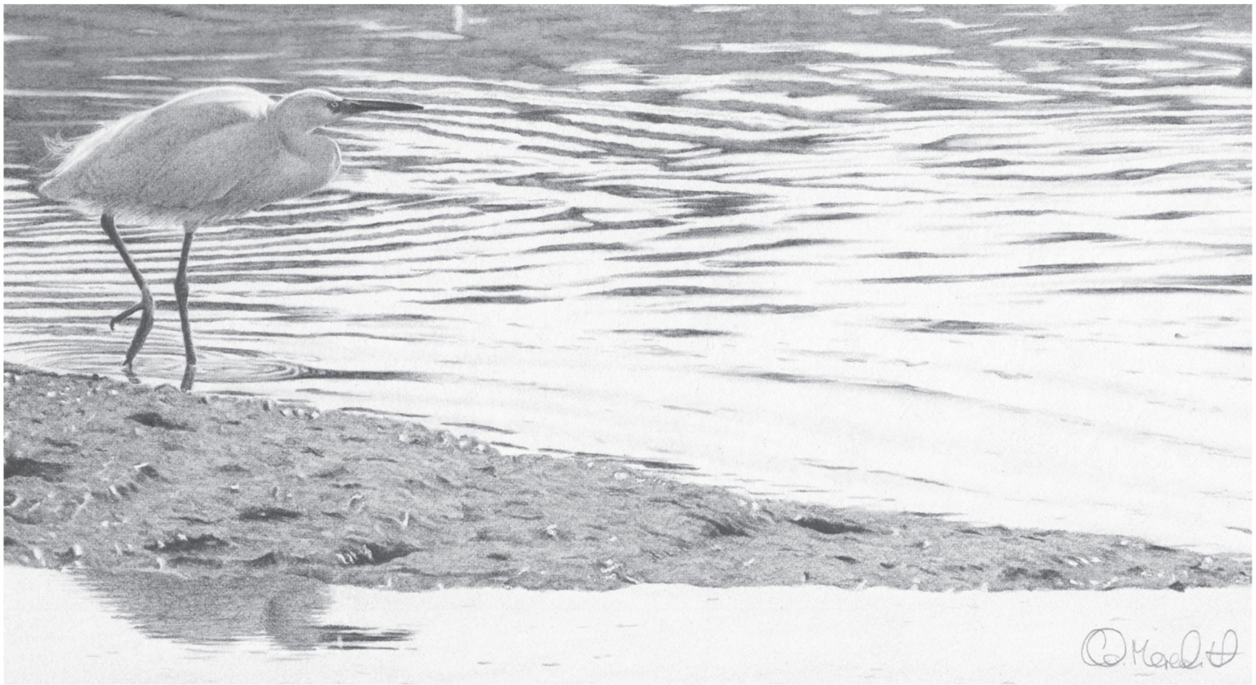


John Threlfall: whooper swans. What could have been a white on white scene has been energized by imaginative placement of

complementary hues; a vibrant and gently active scene.


Peter K. Mathios ©2008

Peter Mathios: hooded merganser. Gentle ripples handled with great dexterity.

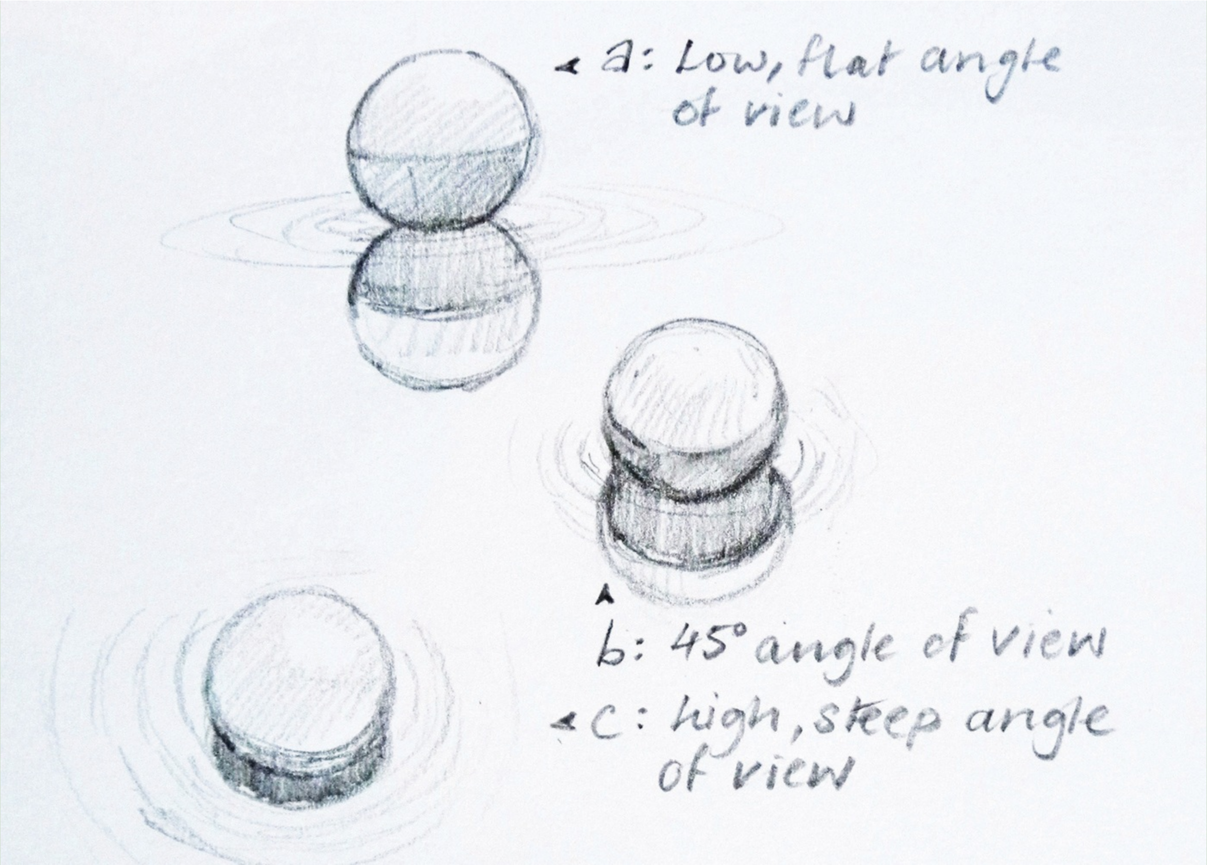


Clive Meredith: egret. Water, mud and light rendered in graphite.

EXERCISE: REFLECTIONS

Take a ping-pong ball and float it in a bowl of water. Change your angle of view and note how the reflection diminishes as your elevation increases.

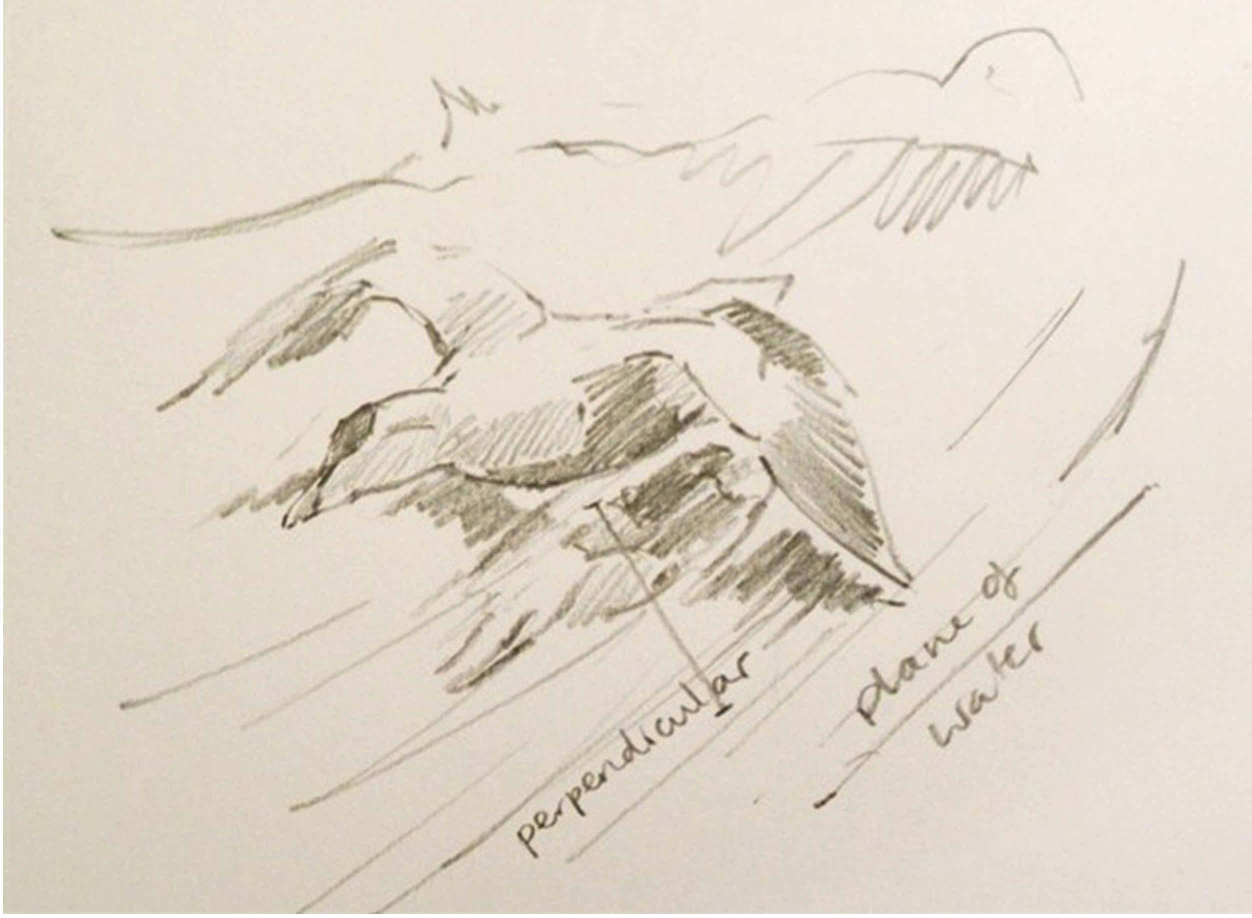
Reflections are subjected to many kinds of distortions, due to the conditions of the water. Light ripples create successive reflective planes causing the reflection to stretch perpendicularly. Reflections are also subject to the effects of perspective in just the same way as threedimensional objects.


a: Low, flat angle of view
b: 45° angle of view
c: high, steep angle of view

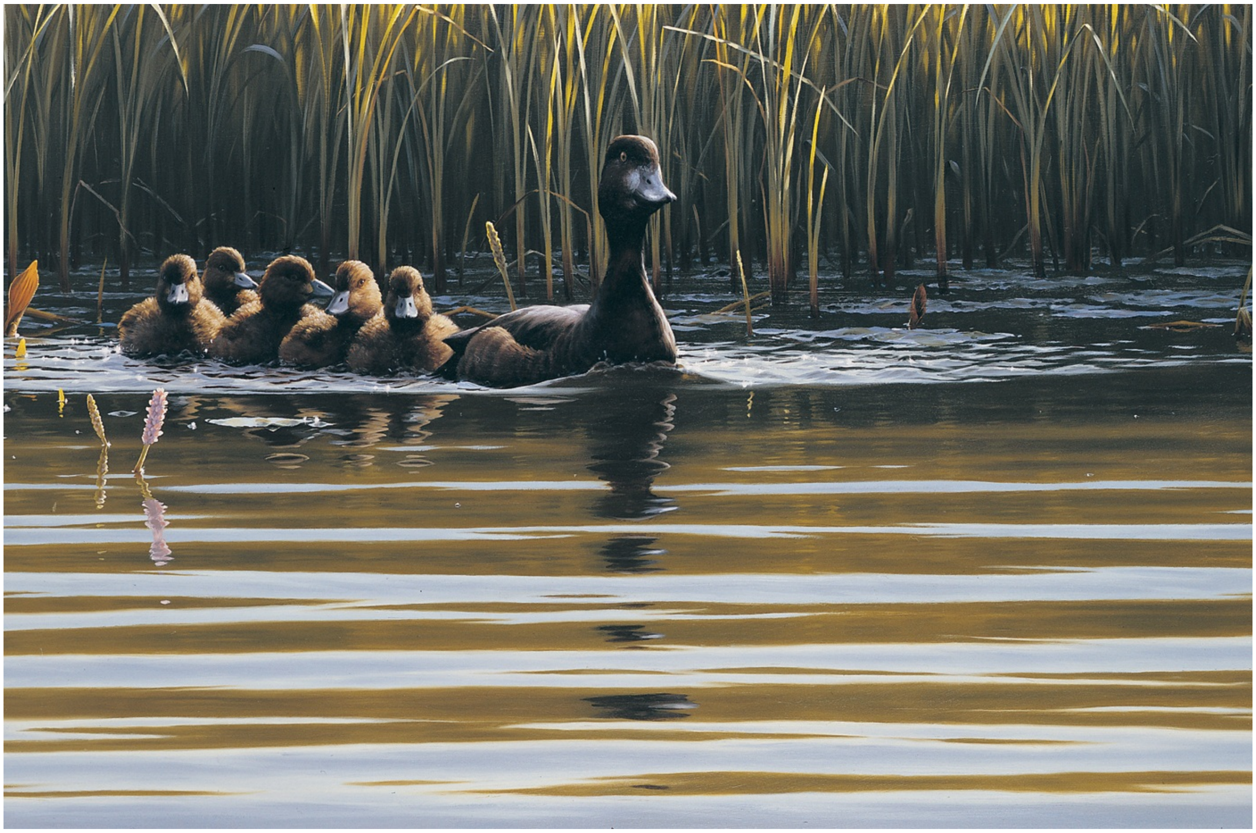
Reflections of a ping-pong ball floating on water. The higher the point of view, the less the ball's reflection will be seen. The flatter the angle of view, the more the reflection will look to 'mirror' the object. Note also that any ripples caused by the object will adhere to the laws of perspective: being more elongated and flatter in example (a), and becoming more circular as the angle of view rises. This principle is important when depicting any object on water: balls, ducks or even raindrops.

Reflections will (generally) be vertically underneath the object – with flat, calm water the reflection is perpendicular. In certain circumstances the water may be lying at an angle, say on a wave-face or as it cascades down a waterfall. Here, although due to the nature of the movement in the water there will be significant distortion to any reflection, it will still be generally directly parallel to the bird, and not directly plumb below as it would be in flat water.

These are only guides to what to be aware of when approaching the subject of reflections and it should be noted that many different types of effect can be created as a result of atmospheric conditions and disturbance to the water surface. Indeed, in very bright and choppy conditions, perhaps there may be no suggestion of a recognizable reflection, the water's surface reflecting highlights of the sky. The recommendation would always be to study the effects of light first-hand; go into the field and observe for yourself how things are.



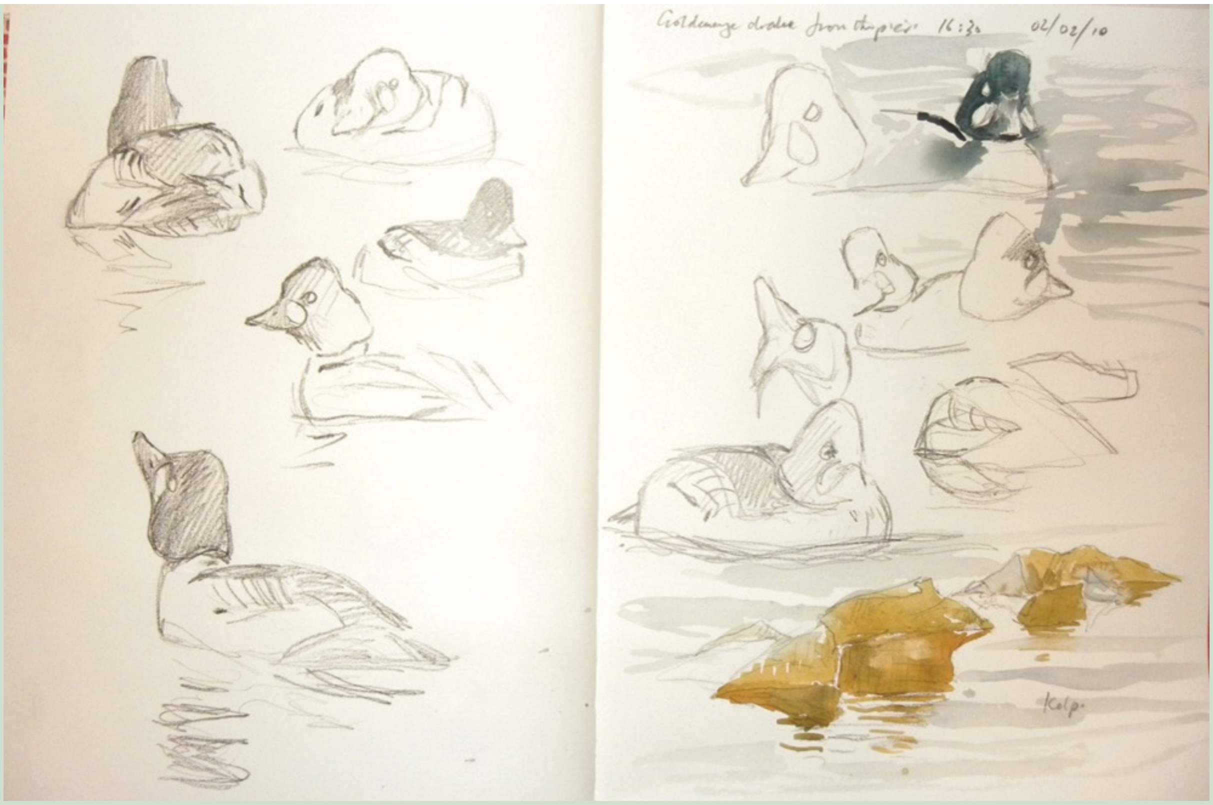
Tim Wootton: eider with reflection.



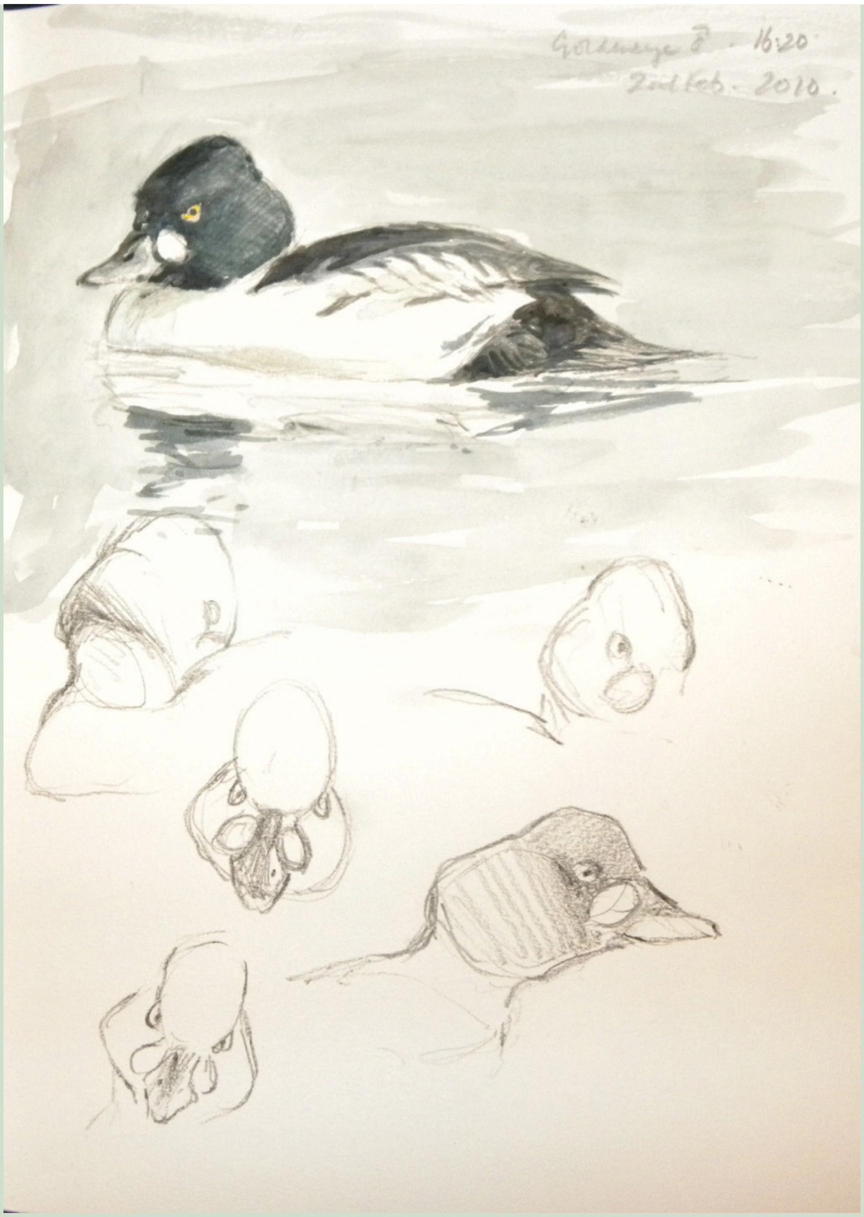
Chris Rose: *Follow Me*. Acrylic on panel. Slices of reflection radiate towards the viewer.

GOLDENEYES

I simply could not resist the urge to make this painting of three goldeneye drakes; smart little ducks they are, and every morning during the winter they are constant companions as I walk along the seashore. They always give me the eye as I pass by, only continuing with their hunt for food once I'm safely out of the way. Although there are no females with these drakes, this doesn't stop them posturing and displaying to each other as if there were. For a few days I could actually watch them on the sea from my living room window where I have a small telescope set up on the window sill. These are the sketchbook drawings and a larger watercolour which I will take on another stage later, perhaps an oil painting.

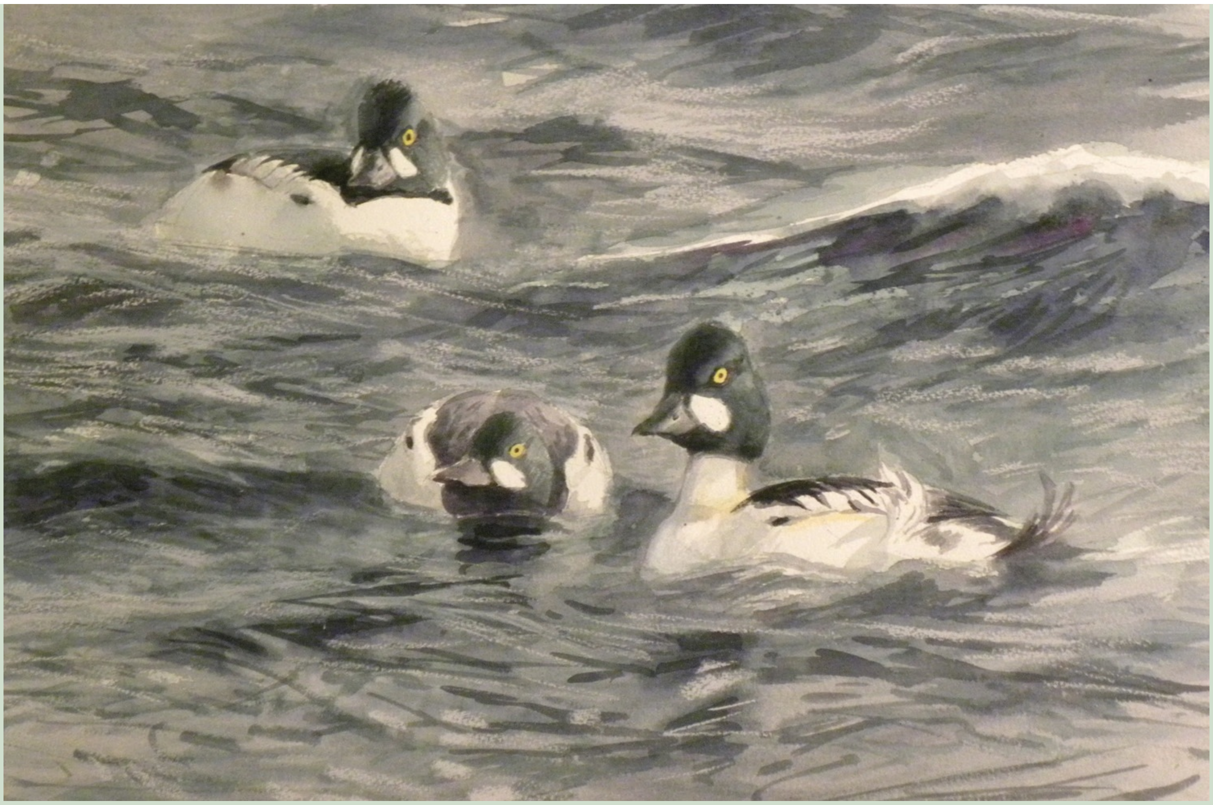


Goldeneye drake from the pier. 16:30 02/02/10

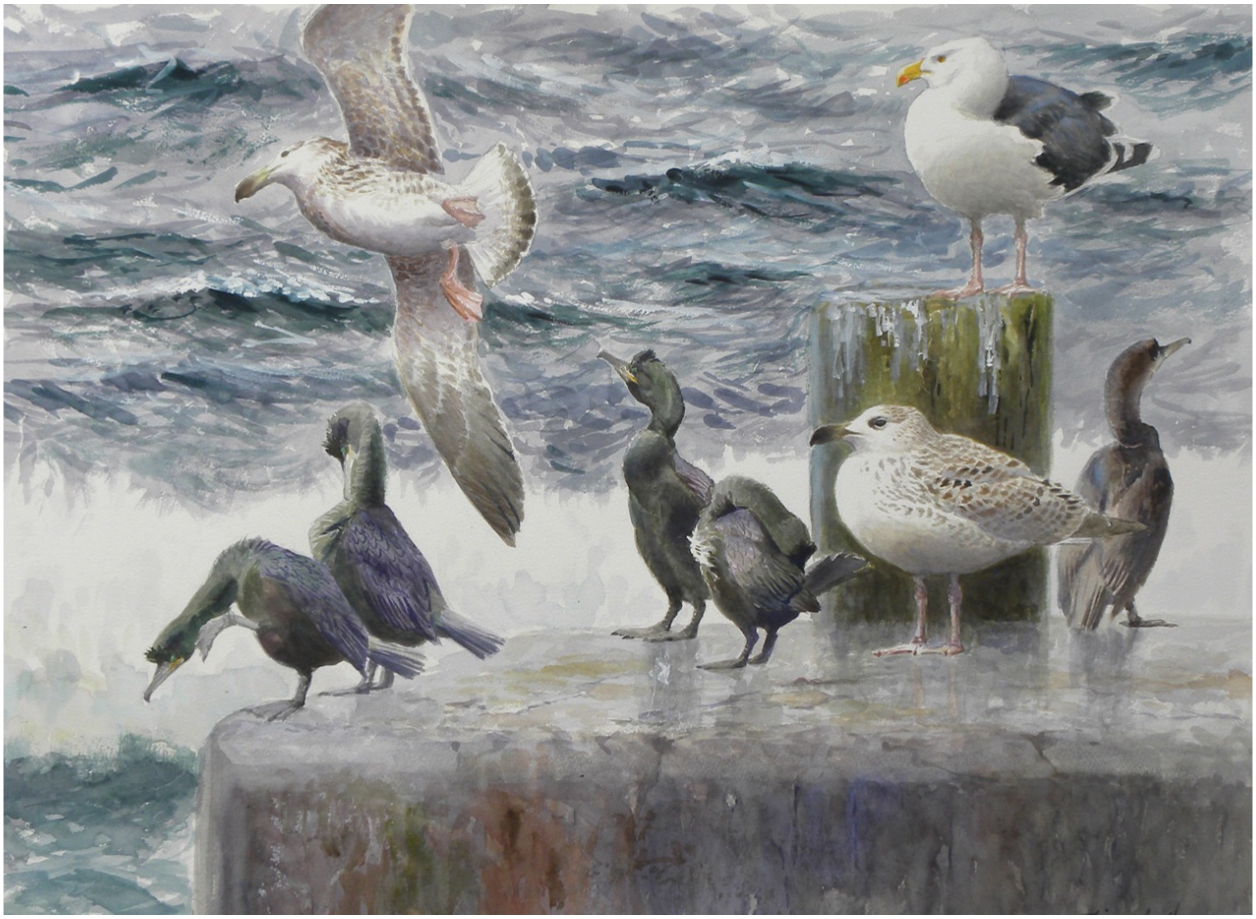


Goldeneye ♂ · 16:20

2nd Feb. 2010.



Tim Wootton: *Giving the Eye*. Three goldeneye drakes in a watercolour studio painting with some grey pastel over-drawing, derived from sketchbook studies. The overcast winter sky colours the water grey/blue. I wanted all the birds to be looking at the viewer – it's exactly how they are when I walk past them.

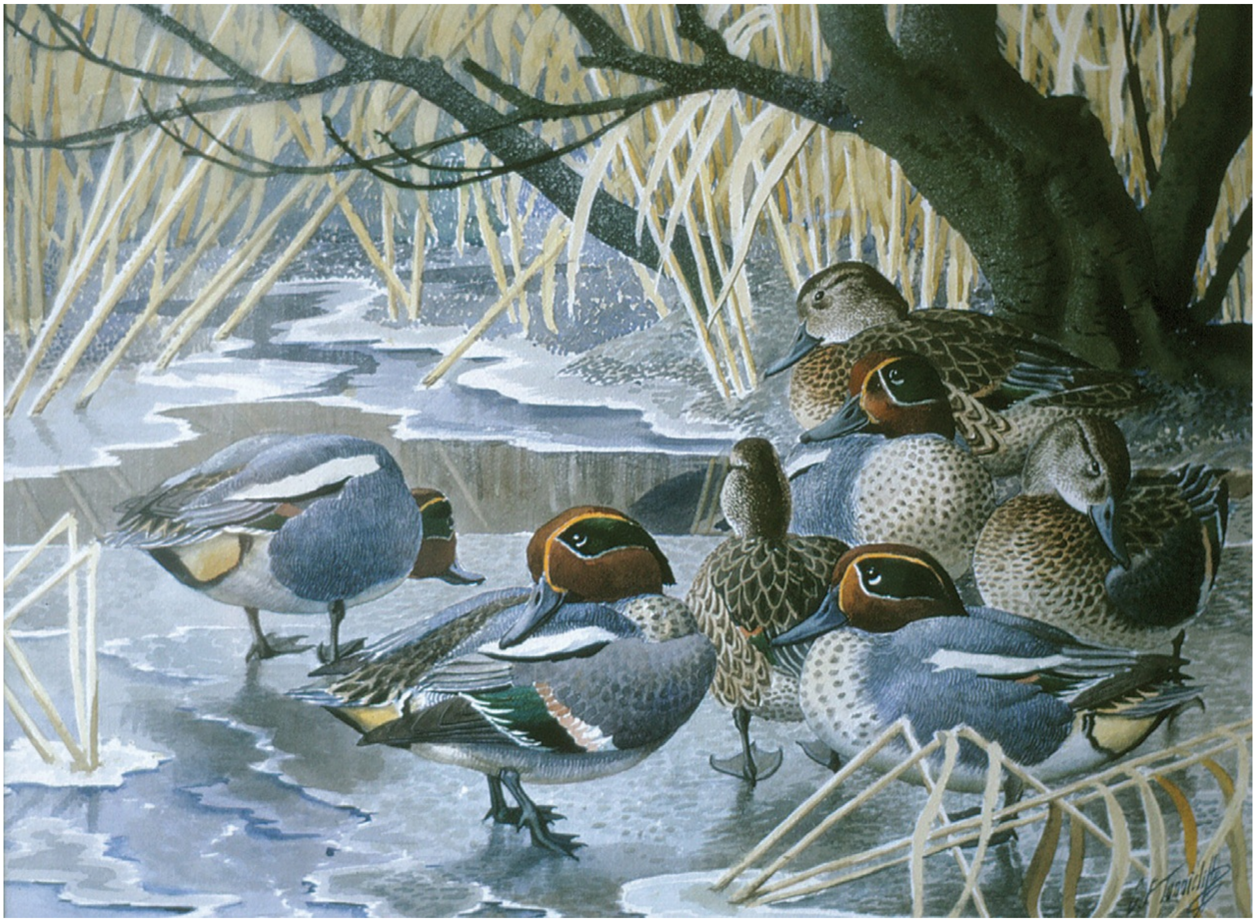


Tim Wootton: *On the Jetty*. Shags and great black-backed gulls on a wet concrete jetty. This is a watercolour painting; the reflections are painted by lightly dragging a subtly darker hue in a downwards motion from the subjects.

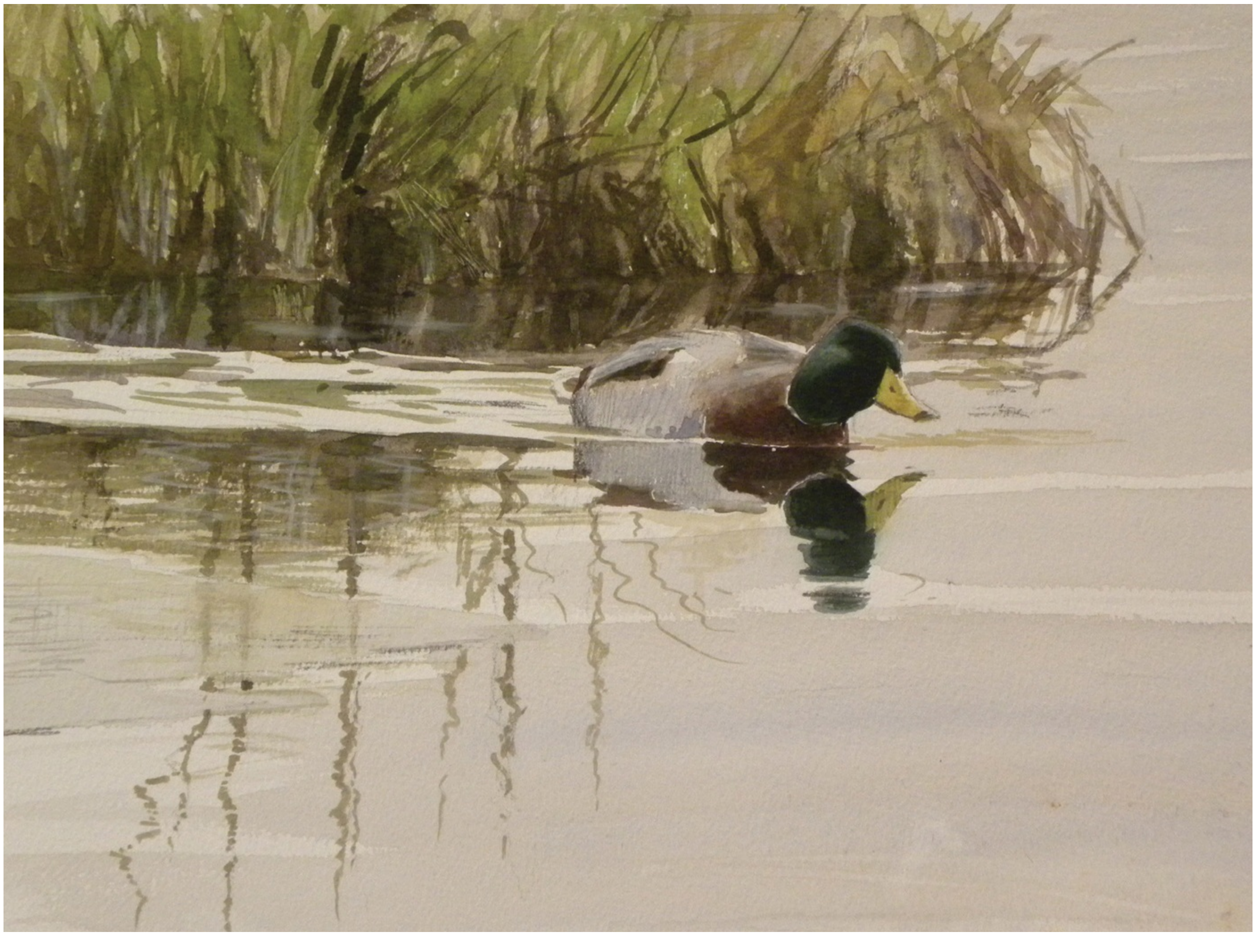
Other reflective surfaces

Wherever there is water there will be the potential for reflections: rain, fog, rivers, lakes and seas. Obvious reflections will occur on wet and hard substrates and each will have distinctive and individual properties.

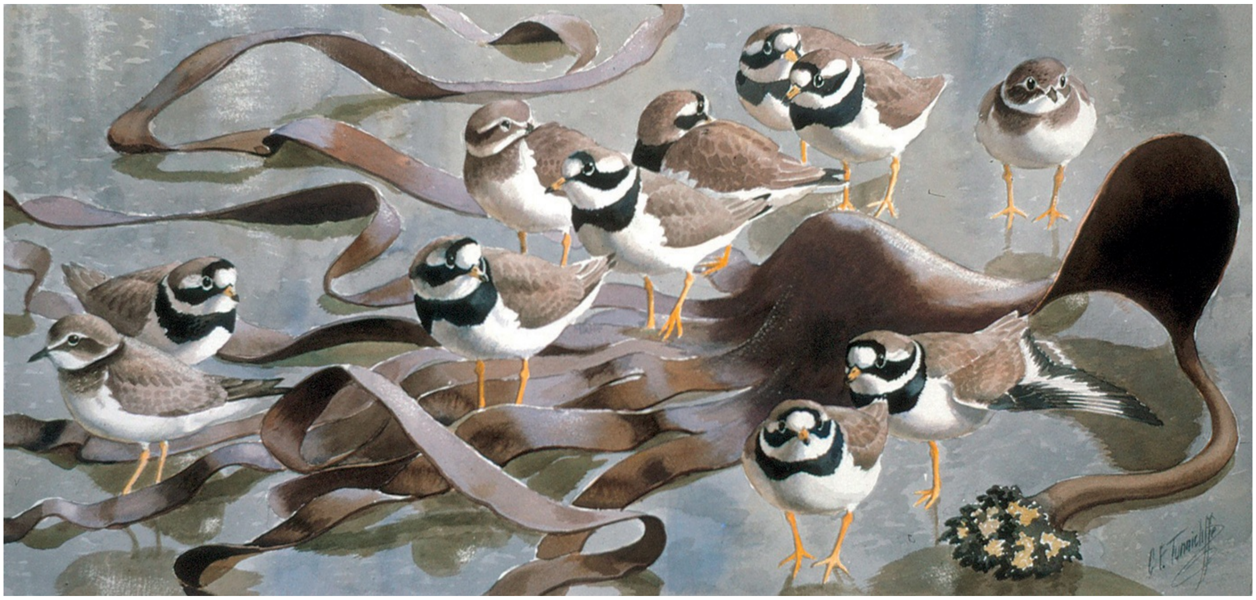
Each surface creates a different type of reflection, as described above. Ice has many forms and has many properties relating to these. The ice I have included in this painting is smooth sheet ice. The reflections of the long stems in the ice are suggested by using a dry-brush with greyish-brown watercolour paint sketched across the surface. I used a vertical action with the brush which helps to give the illusion of the reflective surface. It’s a similar technique to the one I used in the shags and gulls painting, *On the Jetty* (above).



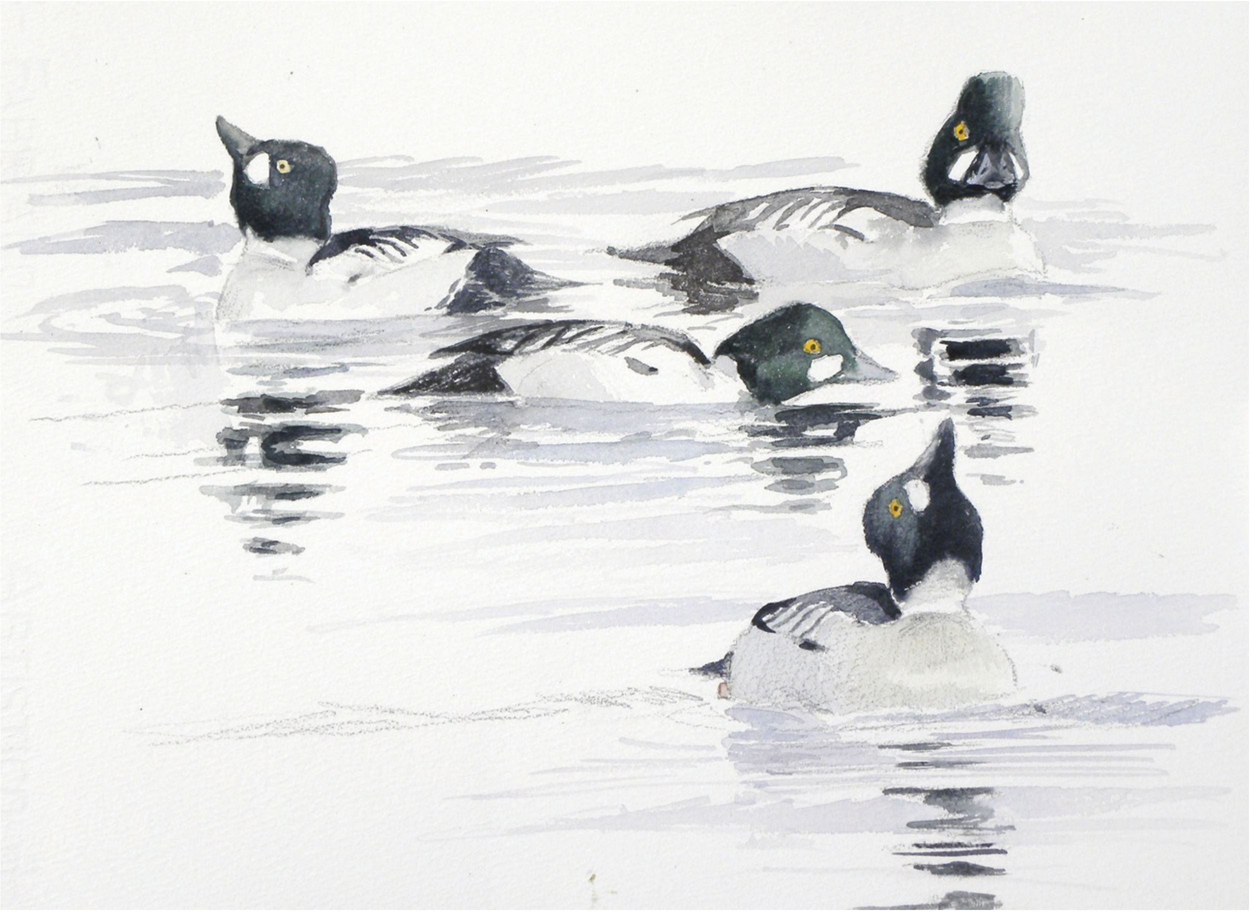
C.F. Tunnicliffe: teal. Hazy reflections in the ice contrast with those in the open water, which are brighter and in focus.



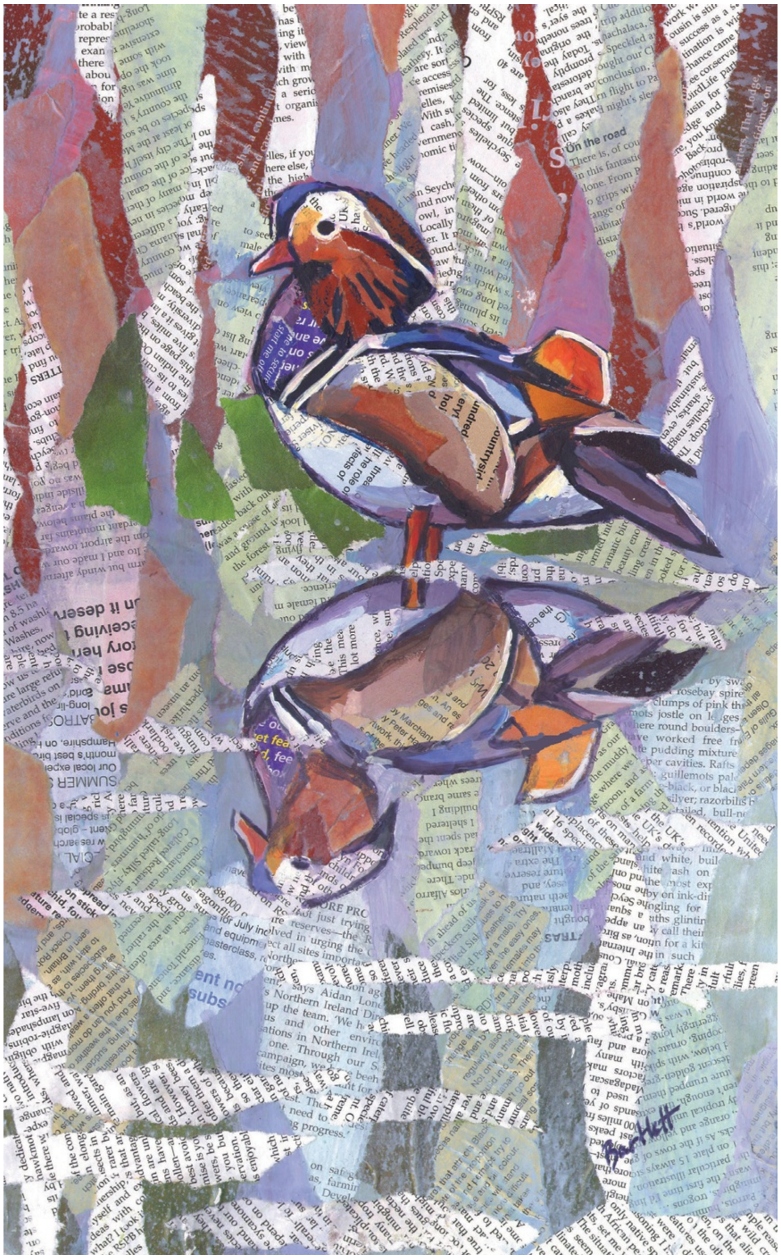
Tim Wootton: winter mallard. In this colour sketch of a drake mallard I have tried to convey at least four types of reflective surface: calm, mirror-like water directly under the reed bank; turbulent water in the direct wake of the bird which reflects a lot of light and reads as the colour white/silver; gently undulating open water which stretches and contorts reflections slightly; and ice, which gives a softer reflection than still water.



C.F. Tunnicliffe: ringed plovers. A very limited palette of cool blues and greys of the muddy sand reflecting the sky colour with warmer purplish browns in the birds’ upper parts. The dazzle of the whites and the punctuation of the bright orange legs bring the piece an uplifting brightness. The reflections in the wet mud are painted ‘wet in wet’ and convey perfectly the feeling of the habitat.



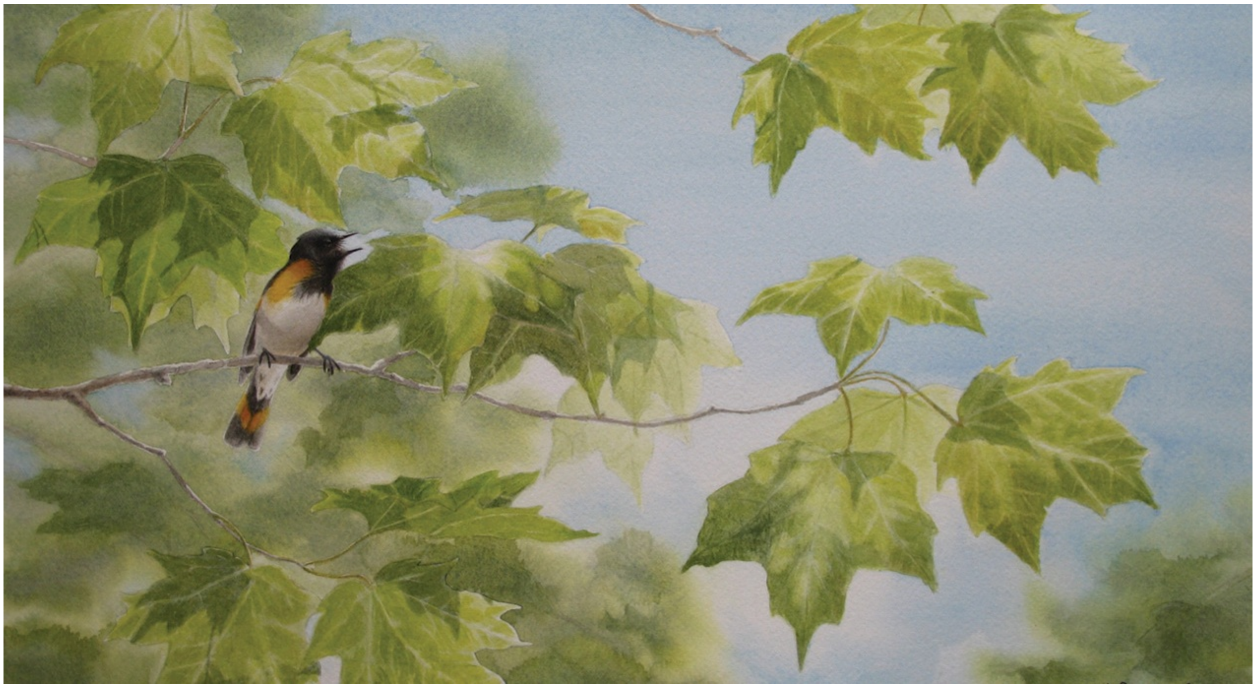
Tim Wootton: goldeneye drakes displaying to each other in late winter.



Paul Bartlett: *Reflective Mandarin*.

BIRDS IN THEIR HABITAT

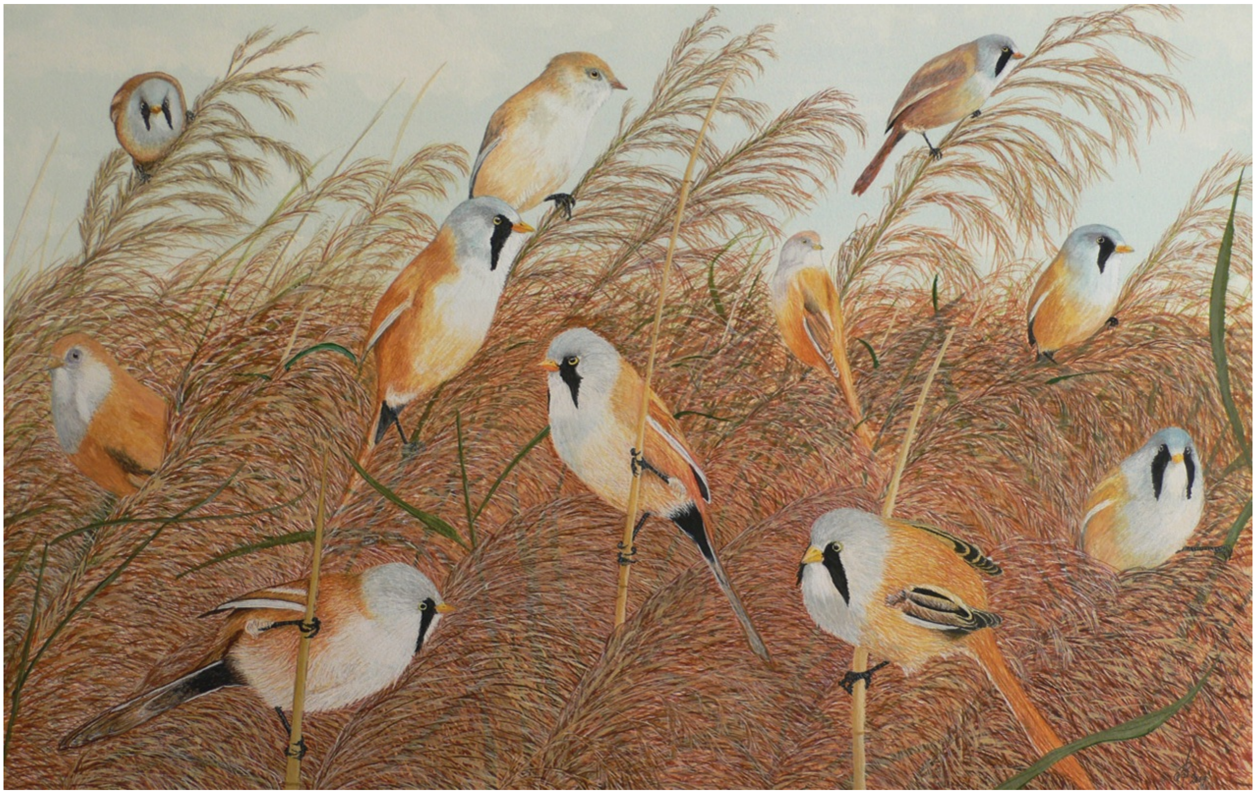
Birds are found everywhere but certain species can be associated with specific habitats. Even when migrant birds are blown hundreds or even thousands of miles off course, they will still make for similar habitat to that which they know. So when dealing with birds in the naturalistic sense it seems reasonable to consider the places where they are found. When collecting your reference for the painting, also study the environs where your bird is and collect reference for that too.



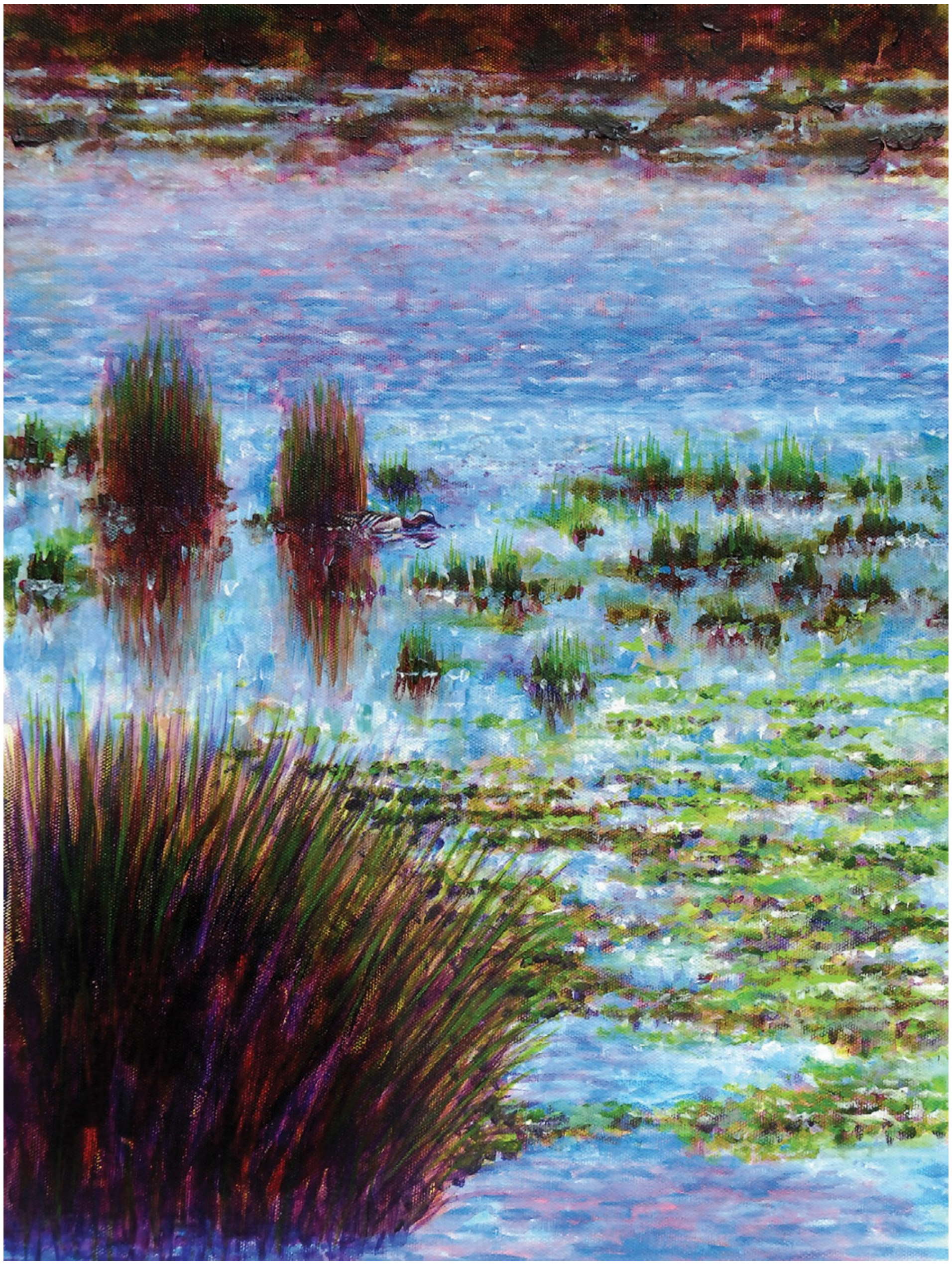
Jocelyn Oudesluys: American redstart in a maple. A balanced painting with the singing bird taking us directly up and right in the frame; the upper leaves hold the attention and bring us down and back along the branch.

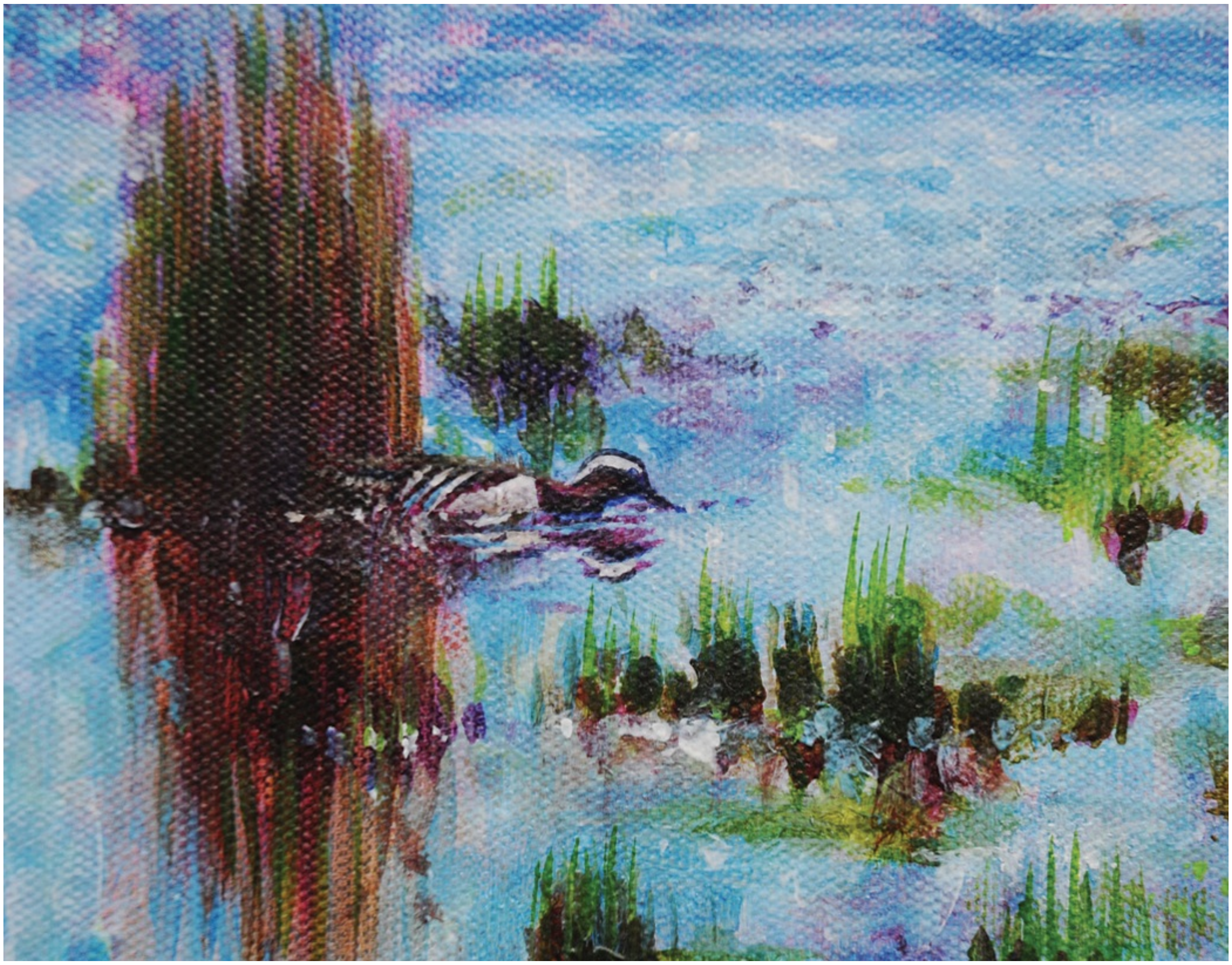
FOLIAGE AND VEGETATION

What you put in a picture should add to the effect you are trying to create and whatever reference you choose, be selective about how you interpret it. Some artists like to paint careful detail in their backgrounds as well as their birds; others may view the environment as playing a supporting role to their main star; others still will want to portray the bird as an intrinsic part of the environment, and inseparable from it.

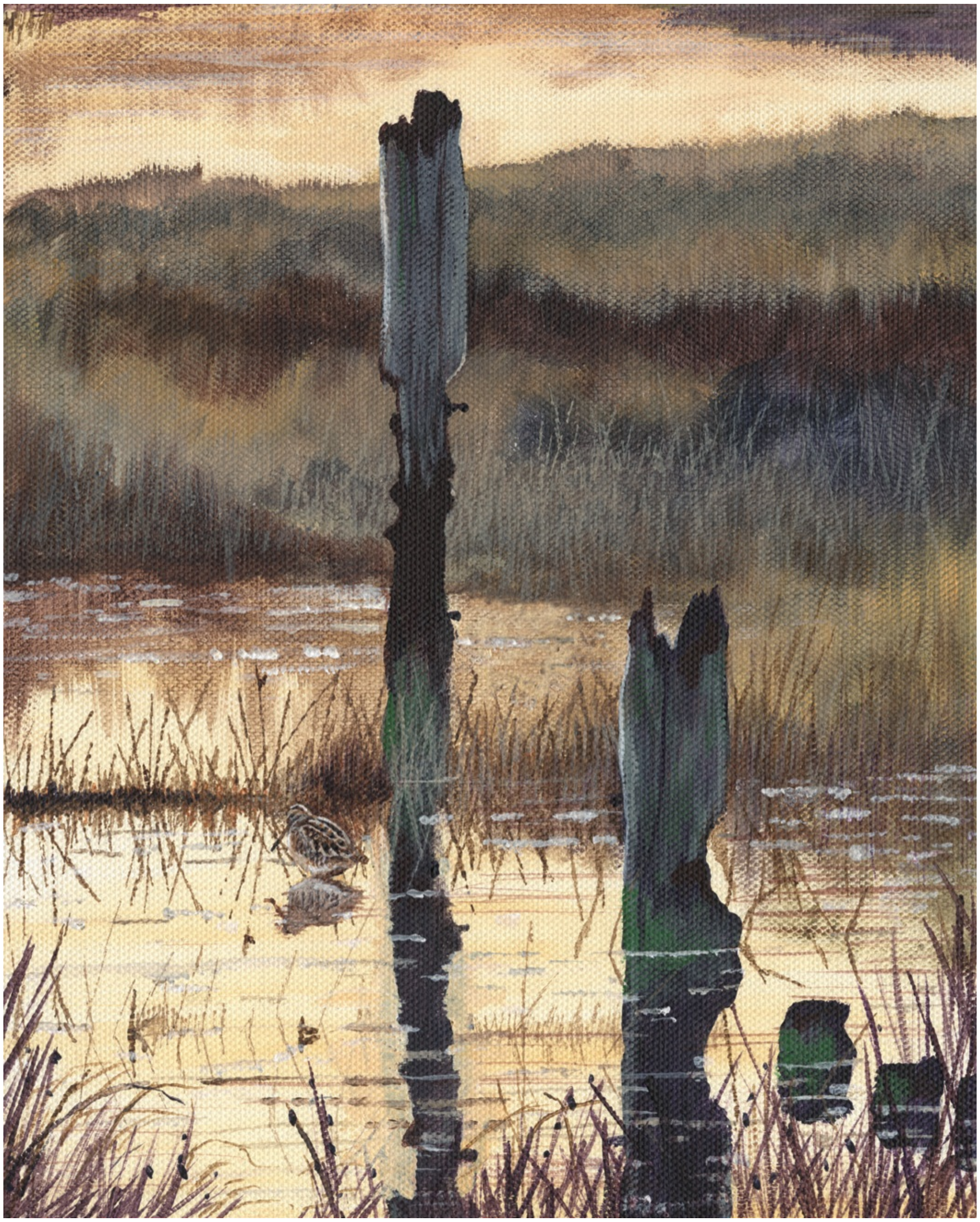


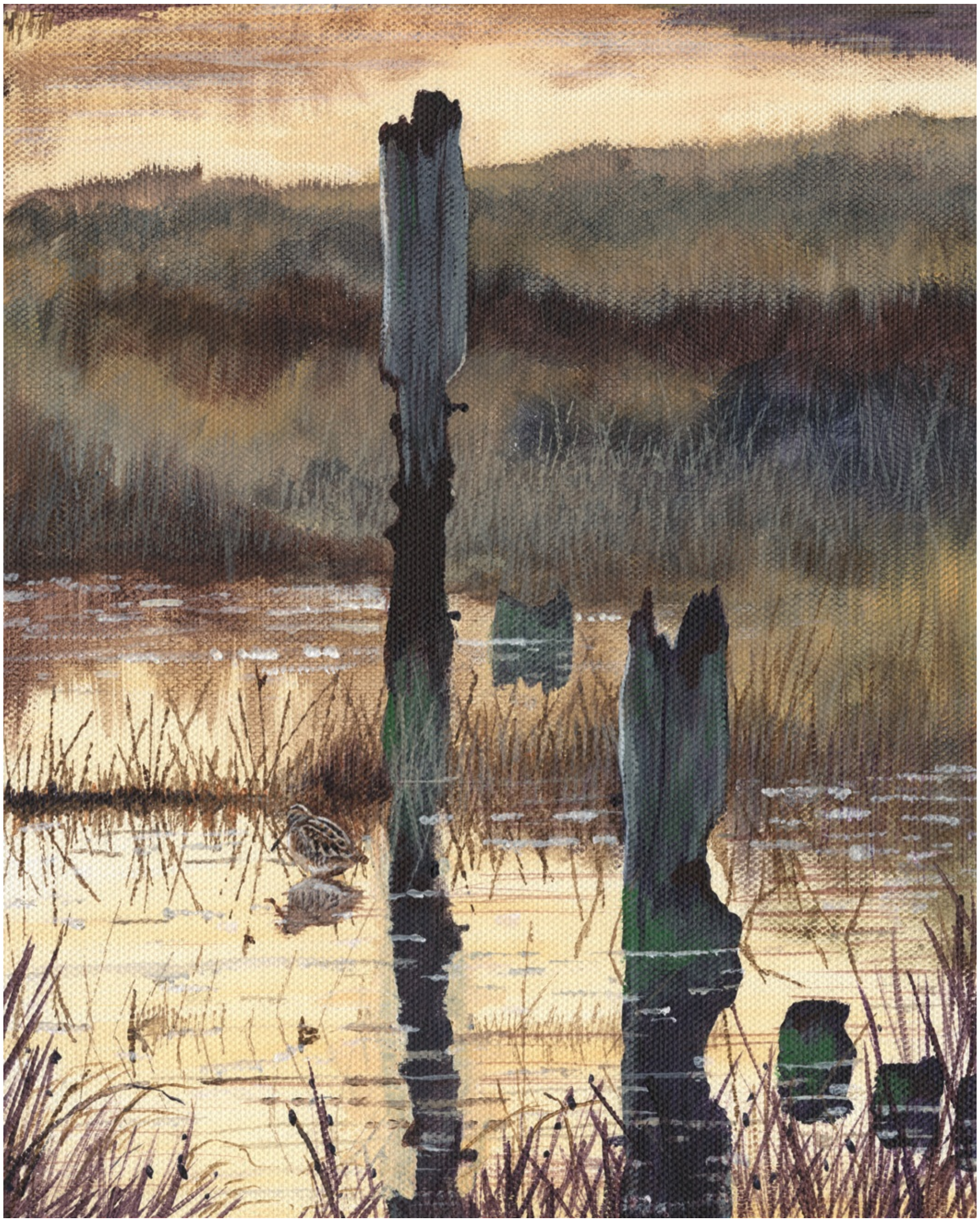
Arthur Bishop: bearded tits. The artist has depicted these little birds in ultra-typical surroundings, the birds being scattered across the picture in a naturally busy composition.





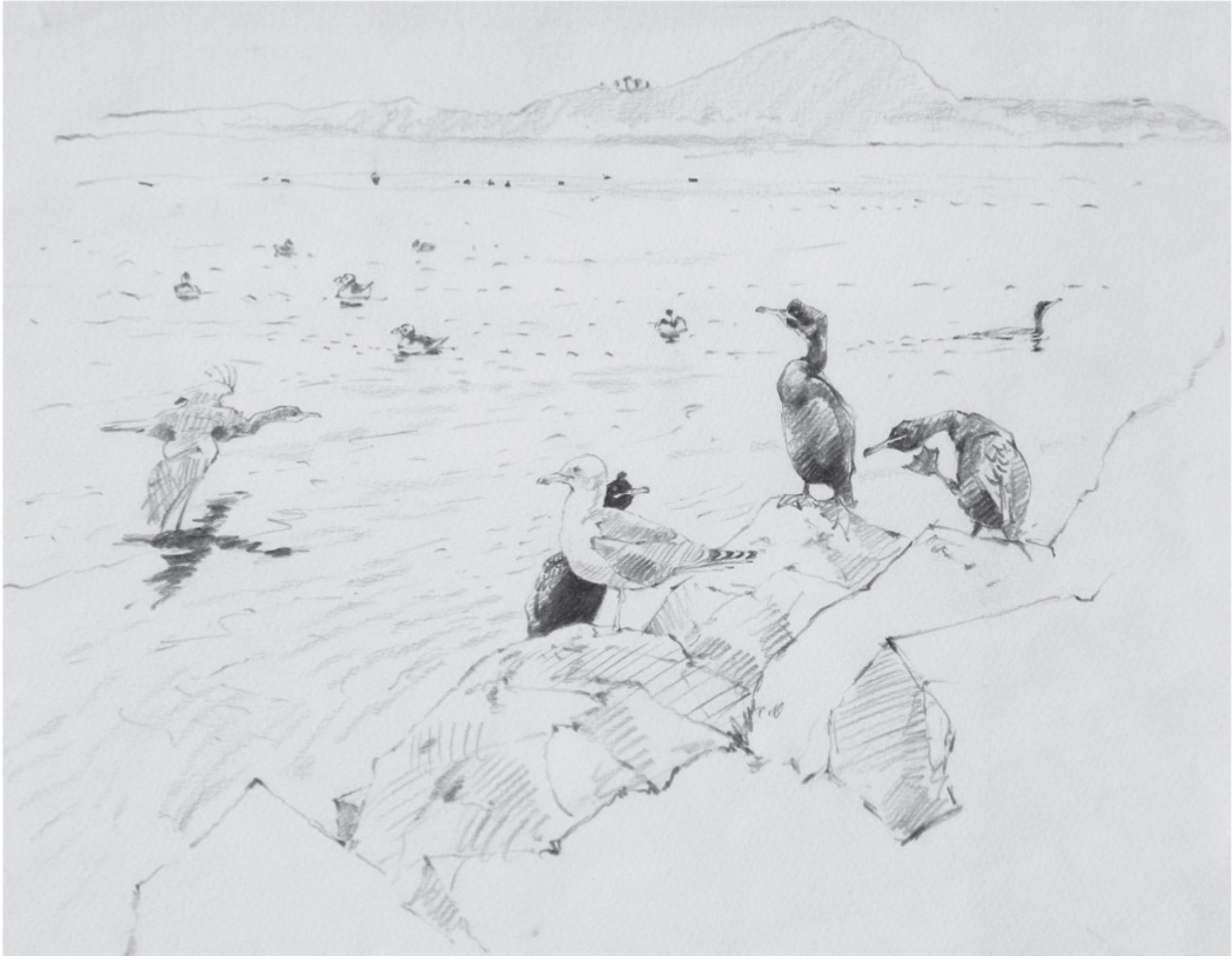
Ed Keeble: garganeys. A painting about the experience of seeing this wonderful little duck; the artist is keeping true to his vision and showing the bird just as he remembered it. There’s no attempt to over-emphasize the bird: as when birdwatching; if you see it – well done, and if not, just enjoy the scenery.



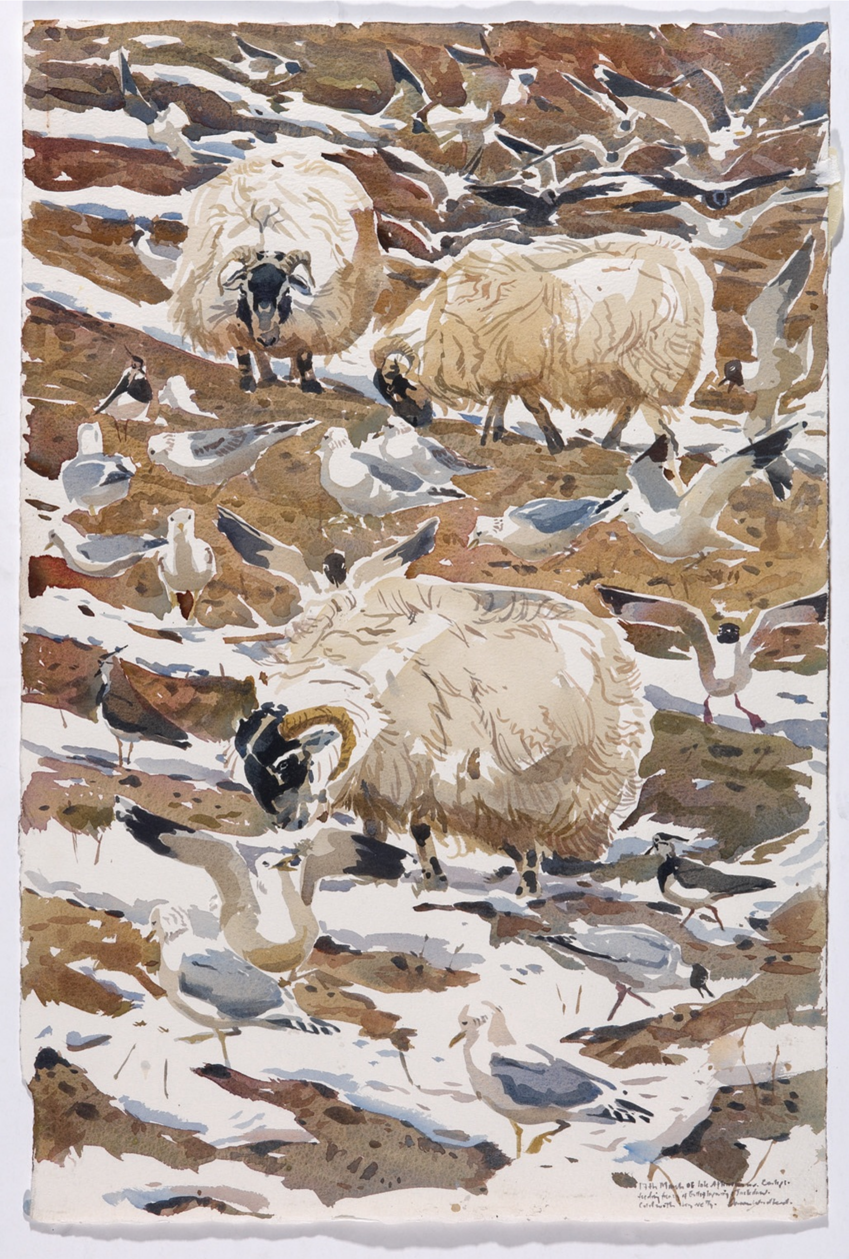


Mike Woodcock: *Settled In* (acrylic). Mike spends a lot of time getting things 'right' and had almost completed this piece but was undetermined about the final composition. The issue was the fifth broken stump along the line of the old fence. With the last stump missing, he felt the viewer's eye would follow the diagonal up and left and out of the picture frame; with the inclusion of the last stump, we are now encouraged to follow the line of posts then cut back to the fifth one, which then takes us top right. The dark brown band of colour prevents us straying too far and brings us back

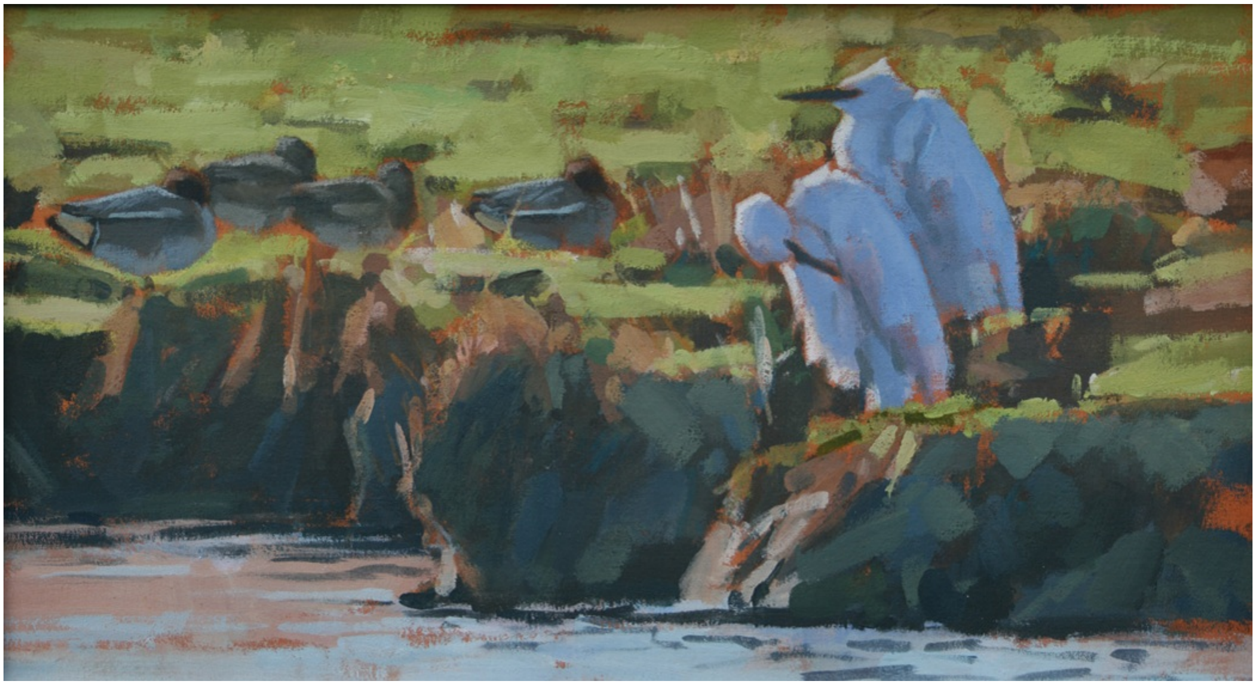
across to the left where we can drift back and explore the middle and bottom of the painting. It's possibly only now that we spot the snipe quietly feeding in the shallow water at the base of the longest pole.



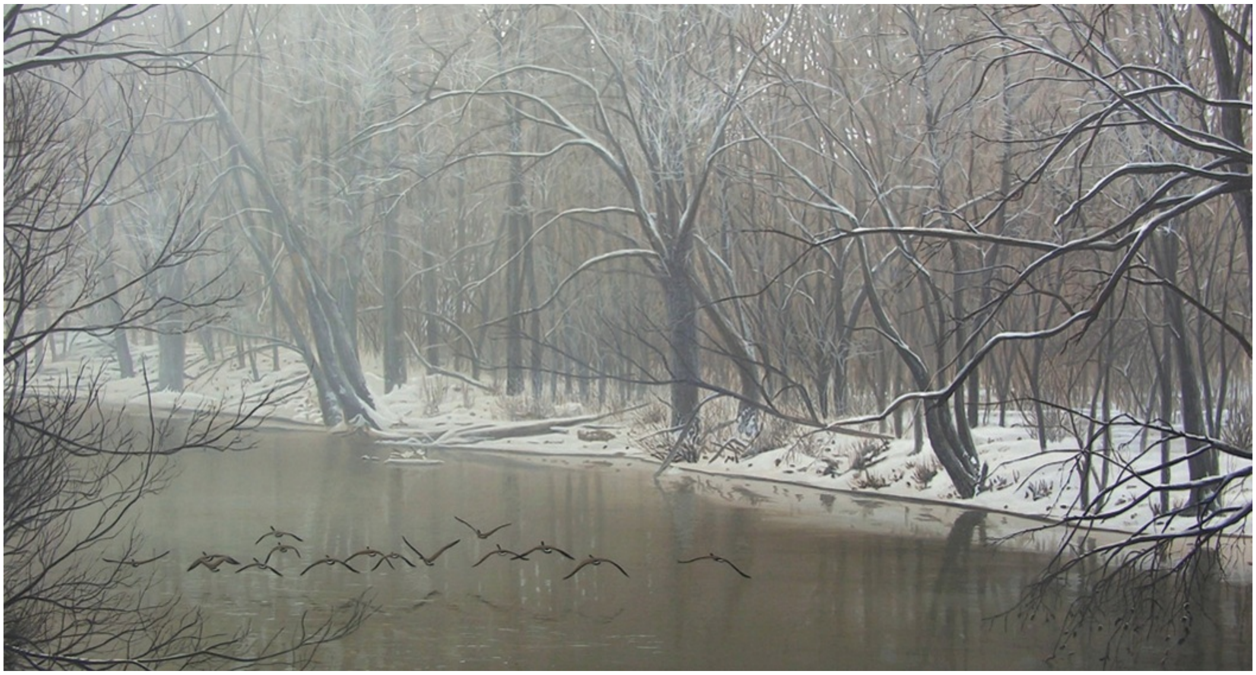
John Busby: *Shags, Gulls and Puffins – Craigleith Island*. It would be easy to think John has merely taken a memory snapshot of the scene, put pencil to paper and transcribed the view, so naturally does each element sit in the picture. Constantly intrigued and entertained by the ways of birds, he incorporates little touches, which, although perfectly natural, have a witty element which delight him – and us.



Darren Woodhead: sheep and gulls. A painting flowing with the rhythms of nature. We’re encouraged to look and discover and everywhere there is something new to find: gulls against snow, part-hidden lapwings and the bustling bulk of the sheep.

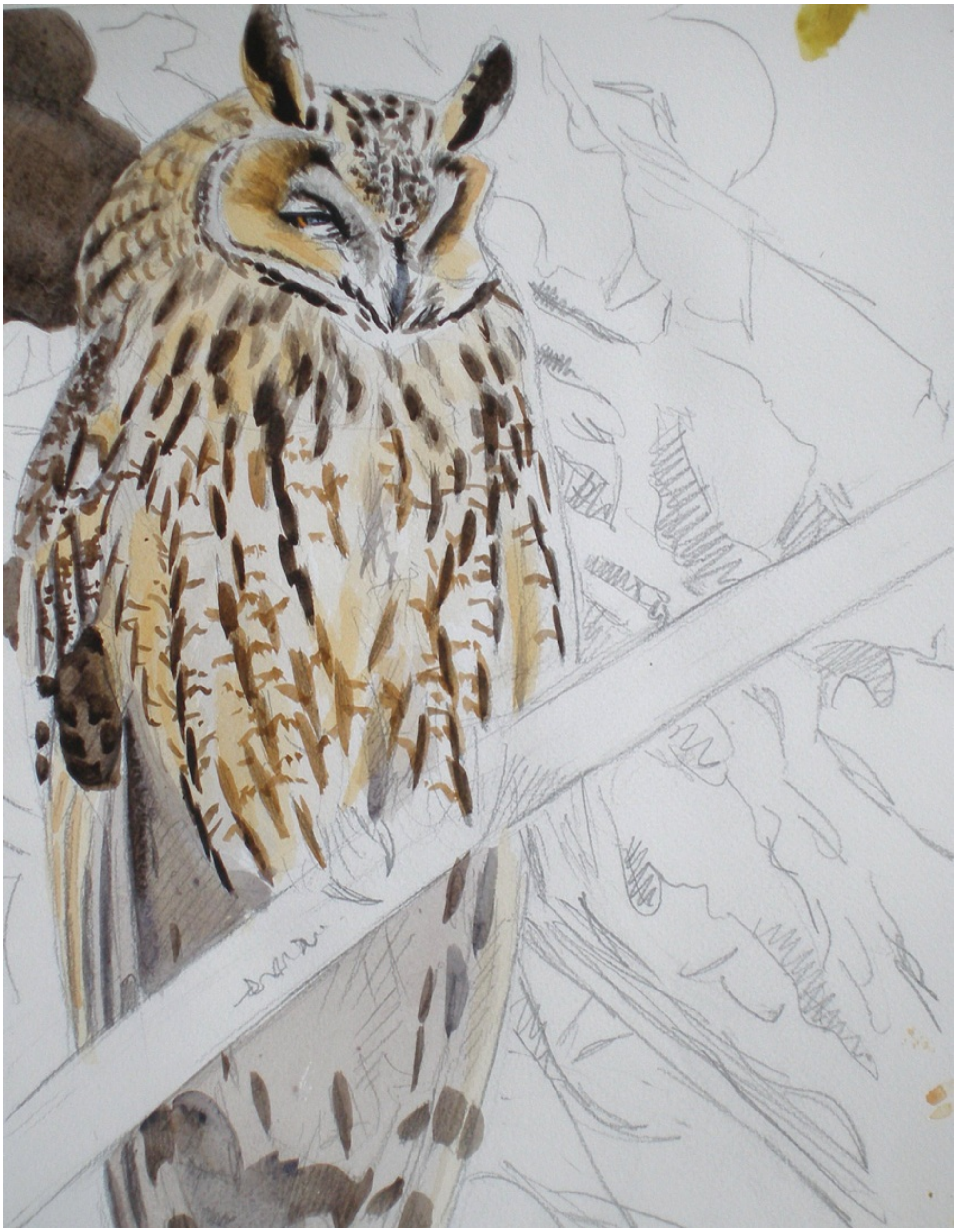


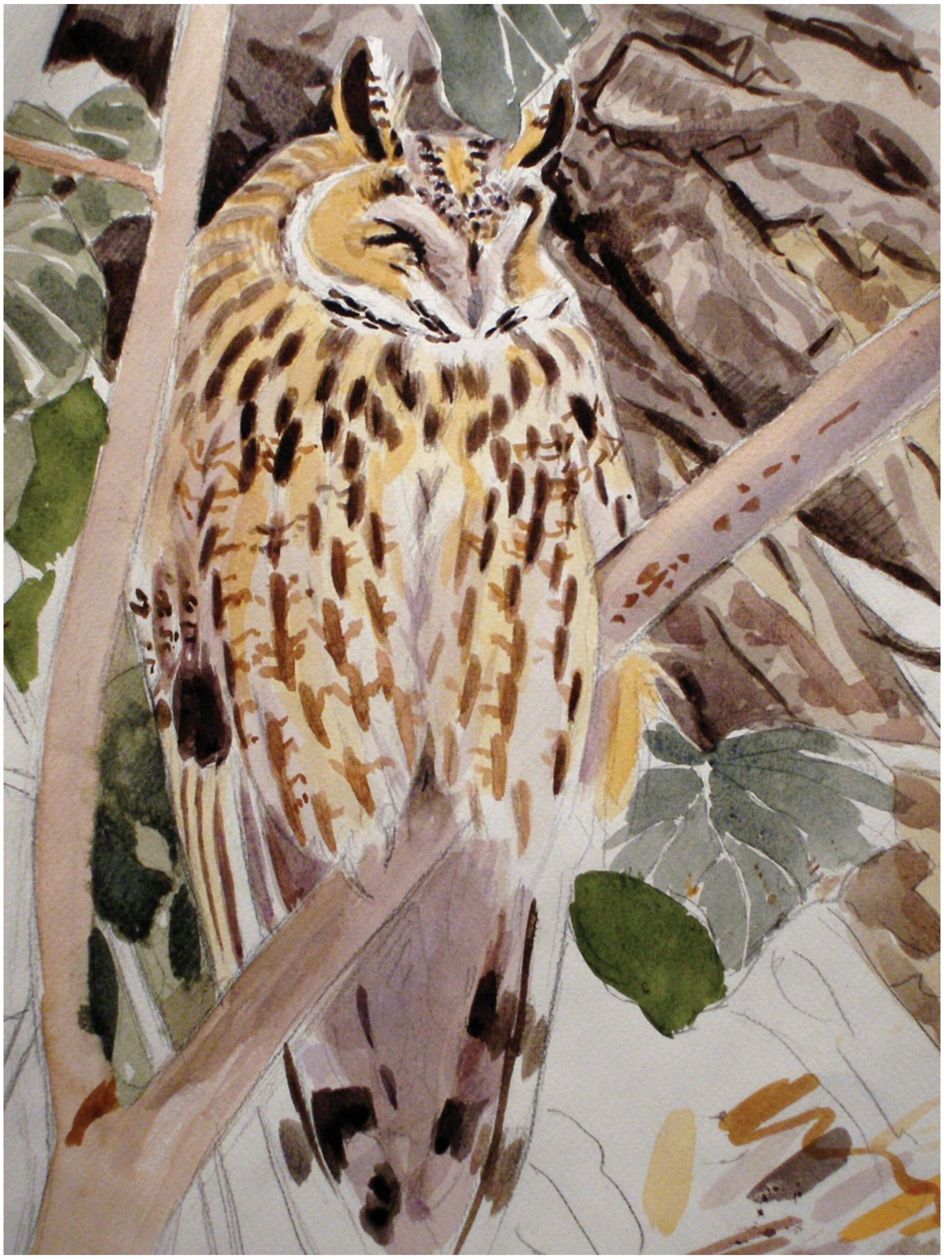
John Threlfall: egrets and wigeon. The sculptural qualities of the birds and the roughly eroded bank side are rendered with strong slabs of colour; the resting wigeon is barely noticeable, echoing the purple/grey shadows of the banking.



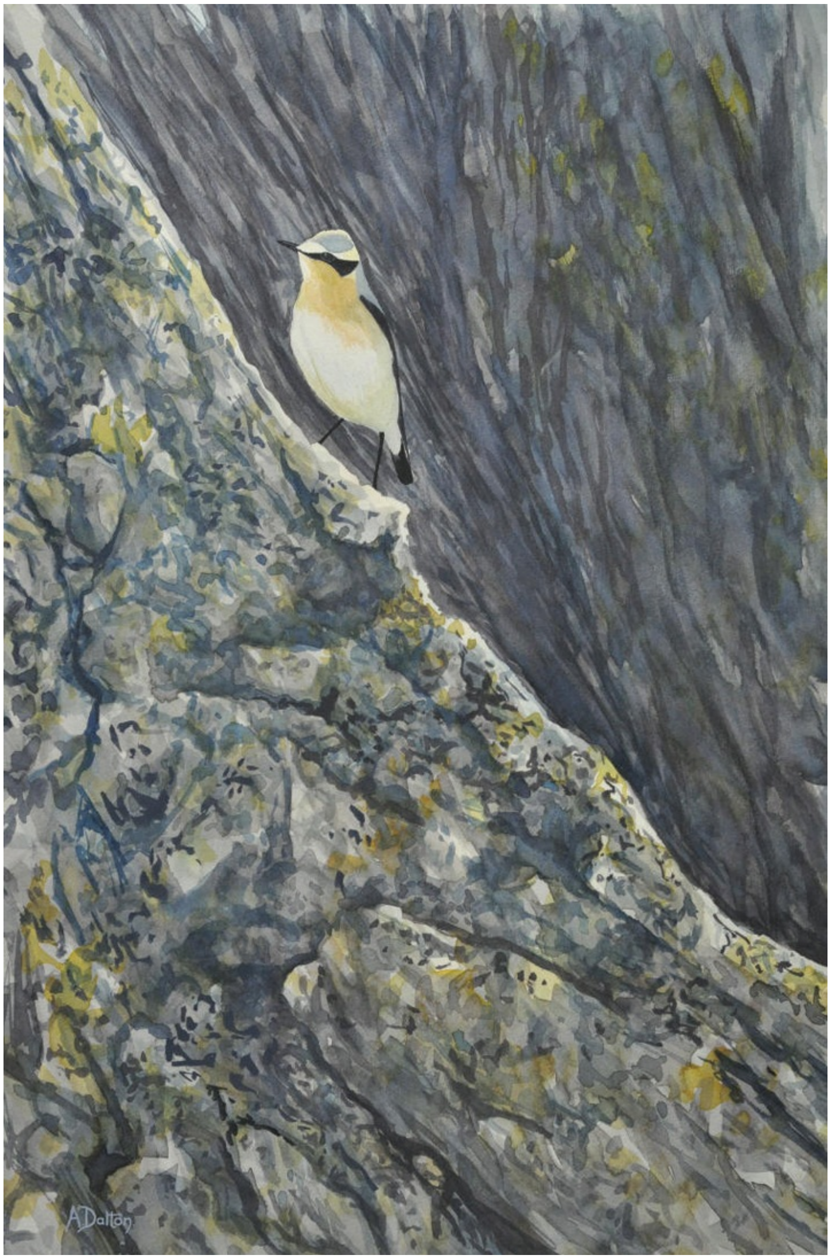
Peter Mathios: *Geese Up-river*. The artist very deliberately wants the

birds to fly through the scene; they aren't held in space by unnecessary detail yet are alive in the frosty landscape.

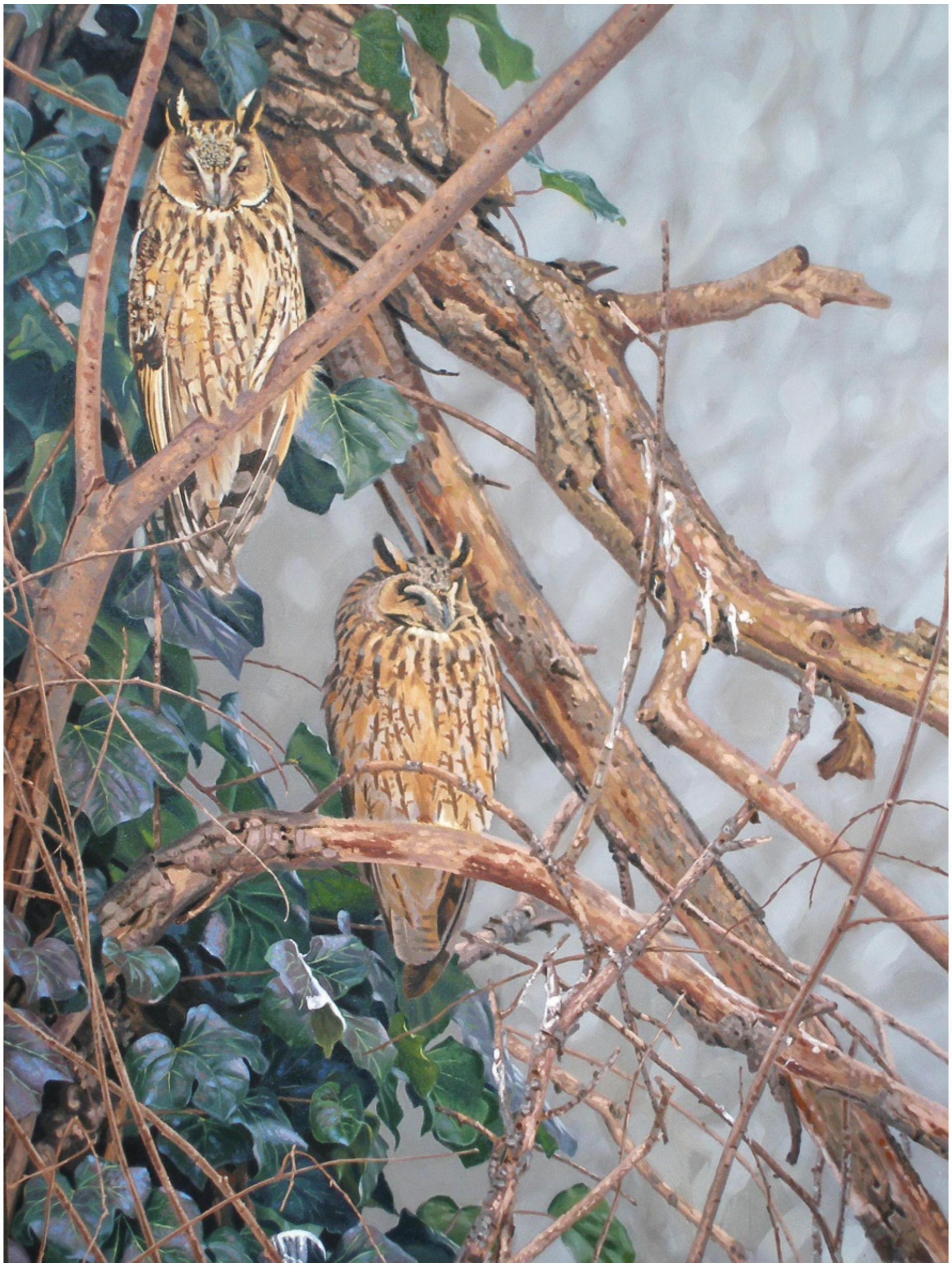




Szabolcs Kokay: long-eared owls (field paintings).



Alan Dalton: spring wheatear. This is a bird to melt the heart, and the artist’s unashamed indulgence in the piece reveals his love of the bird and what it symbolizes: winter is all but over and summer stretches before us.



Szabolcs Kokay: long-eared owls (oil on canvas). The finished studio piece owes much to the high-quality fieldwork; the characterful owls in their daytime winter roost sit naturally. Szabi had a different background but decided it was imposing on the scene too much, so he painted a grey woodland texture throughout, bringing the tree and owls into the foreground.

CHAPTER 8

ADVANCED TECHNIQUES

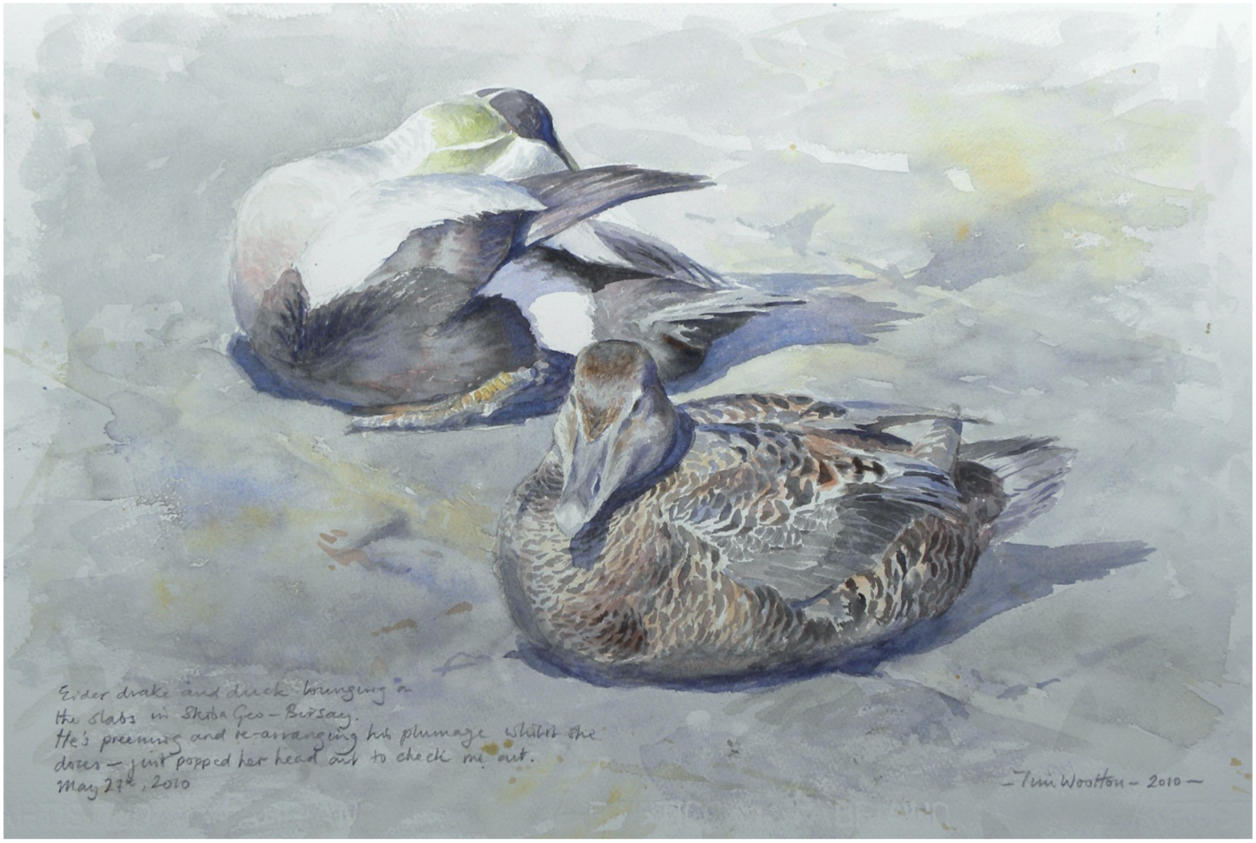
It doesn’t make much difference how the paint is put on as long as something has been said. Technique is just a means of arriving at a statement.

Jackson Pollock

Technique is noticed most markedly in those who have not mastered it.

Leon Trotsky

One of the great challenges to you as an artist will be ‘how to realize your vision’. Regardless of philosophical ideals, there are many ways to approach the making of two-dimensional art: painting in oils, acrylics, gouache and watercolour and several recently developed media with interesting properties; drawing in ink, pastel, charcoal, oilsticks or graphite; mono printing and lino/woodcutting and etching, collage and all manner of combinations of the above which could be loosely grouped as ‘mixed media’. For the purposes of this book, we’ll try to keep focused on what could be termed the traditional methods of painting and drawing. There is a great deal of information available on the other processes and some or all may be perfect for the portrayal of birds in the capable hands of those with curious minds.


Eider drake and duck lounging on
the slabs in Skiba Geo – Birsay.
He's preening and re-arranging his plumage whilst she
dozes – just popped her head out to check me out.
May 27th, 2010
– Tim Wootton – 2010 –

Tim Wootton: *Light-flood: Eider Pair*.

Some painting processes are very time-and labour-intensive, whereas others are instantaneous and expressive and the piece can be completed *alla prima* (in one sitting).

Painting grisaille is a process where the main values (tones) of the painting are rendered, traditionally in greys but in practice in any muted colour (sepia being a favourite of mine). Sometimes even a toned-down version of the final colour scheme is used.

The following are a few insights into the working methods of wildlife artists.

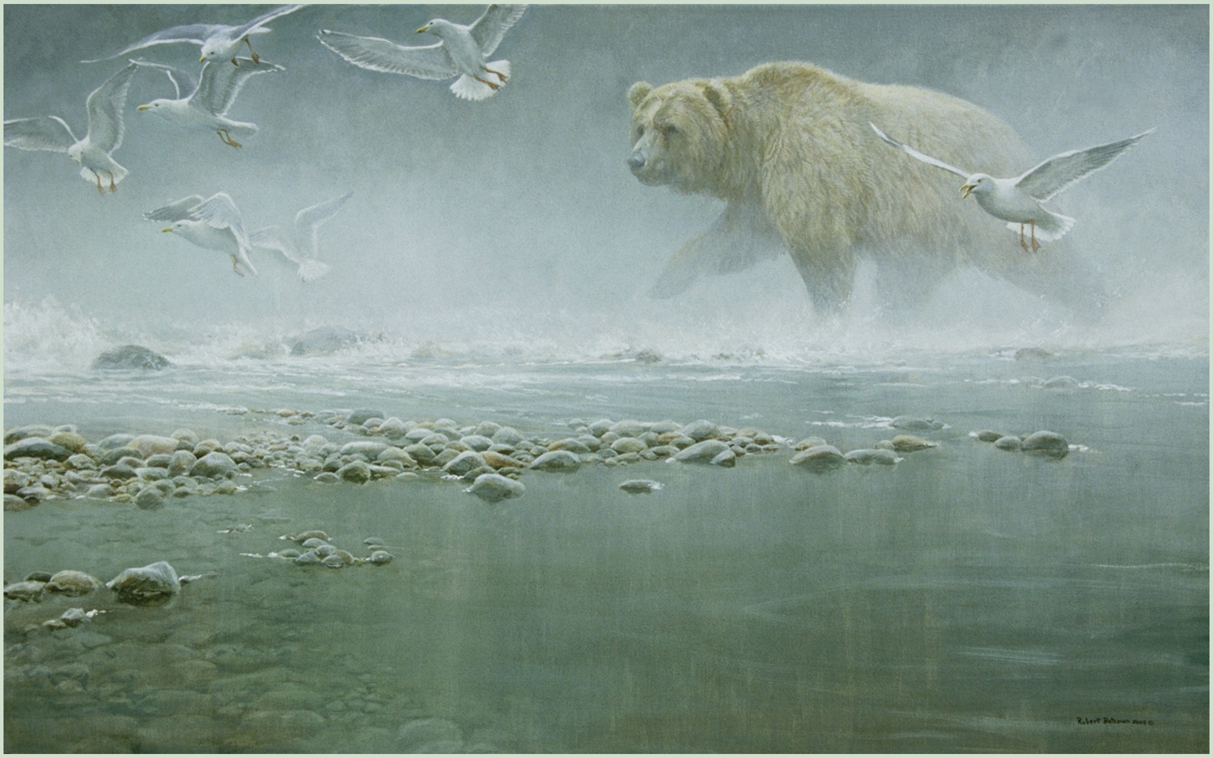
PAINTING IN ACRYLICS

ABOVE THE RAPIDS – GULLS AND GRIZZLY

Robert Bateman describes the journey of the Pacific salmon:

Pacific salmon form an important part of the many bounties of North America’s wild west coast. We all know the epic story of birth in a clear and beautiful mountain stream, the growth of the fingerlings, the journey to the sea, the mysterious years in the deep, distant ocean, then the mass migration back to the place of their birth as handsome, gleaming adults. Then there is the heroic struggle against the current, leaping waterfalls and avoiding capture to the final destiny of courtship, mating and death. The story is almost biblical in its scope.

The salmon is really responsible for the possibility of the great west coast aboriginal nations with their highly evolved cultures. It was an important item in the European settlers’ diet, then later in trade and commerce. And now we know of the health benefits of the Omega 3 fats and oils in salmon. Recently there have been sinister discoveries of too high mercury levels. Now many knowledgeable people tell us of the threat that salmon farming is having on this precious wild heritage.



Robert Bateman: *Above the Rapids – Gulls and Grizzly*. 30 × 48in, acrylic on canvas, 2004.

Salmon, of course, are an essential element for nourishment for wildlife from grizzly bears, to birds, to other aquatic life and insects. Moreover, scientists have just discovered that the nutrients make their way through bears, birds and insects to fertilize the giant west coast lowland forest. Salmon rivers have much bigger trees than non-salmon rivers. This fish is so important and integral to society and nature that many people think it should be the poster creature for the Endangered Species Act instead of the spotted owl.

Although I have not shown a salmon in this painting, you know that they are there. Some are in the quiet water above the falls and others are still fighting their way upstream. This is why the grizzly bear and gulls are there. This is the banquet time so important to these species and many others. It is a far-ranging crime against nature and against ourselves to jeopardize the spectacular wild salmon.

Robert Bateman

First and foremost is the idea or the thought behind the painting. Although it is a joy to create something just for the sake of creating, it is much more satisfying to create something special. It may not necessarily be brilliantly executed, but ‘special’ means it comes from the heart and experience unique to you.

One definition of a masterpiece I have heard… ‘when you see it, you should feel you are seeing for the first time, and it should look as if it is done without effort.’ This is a very, very tough yardstick. I wouldn’t say that I’ve ever done a masterpiece, but when I am struggling with each painting – and they are all a struggle – I often feel that I am nowhere near those two goals.

I take pictures of bits of habitats that I find appealing. I dislike front light, *i.e.* the sun behind the camera, and always choose back light or side light, or diffuse light as in a cloudy day. I love mist because it describes the volume of air between the objects. I also visit zoos and wildlife or waterfowl parks. In using these as photo reference, you must know what happens to captive creatures. Most cats get big bellies, birds often have their primary feathers clipped. Even though one visits the same zoo over and over, there are always surprises of lighting and pose and many other unpredictable factors.

I try not to have parts of the picture fighting for dominance; either the habitat or the animal takes precedence, but not both.

I start with little sketches in pencil about the size of playing cards. I may do one or two or ten until I get the right composition. Since I was an abstract painter in my late twenties and early thirties, I can see the simplified shapes –or abstract qualities – on this small crude scale.

Most often I start right in with a medium paintbrush and a medium dark colour as if I am doing a monochrome, thin watercolour. I rough in the whole composition, including large area washes. Next I go over it all again with slightly lighter tones mixing white with the colours. Then I paint light strokes and highlights, often using white with a bit of yellow ochre. I use a limited palette of colour to harmonize in each picture.

I usually mix some white even with my darker colours to make them semi-opaque from the start. The painting progresses this way, starting out looser and bolder and gradually getting finer and more detailed, light on dark, dark on light, and so on.

For special subjects like bright flowers or birds, I have colours in lesser amounts in tubes: cadmium red light, cadmium yellow light, phthalo rose and phthalo blue or Prussian blue. Each tube lasts me several years.

I use artificial sable brushes of a variety of makes, riggers for fine lines and old worn ones for dry brush effects. For larger areas I use hog's hair brushes or even house paintbrushes. People often ask how long it takes me to do a painting. The answer is, I don't know. I work on five to fifteen at once. I like them when I first start them, then they always get worse so I start a new one to cheer me up. By the time the fifth one looks really awful to me, the first one doesn't look quite as bad, and a new idea about it may have come along so I can work on it for a while. One took me about six years off and on!

Sometimes I have part of the [photograph] that I can't see well enlarged on the computer and brightened so that I can see it better. Of course, this copying of the photo does not go on all the time; I start to take liberties by changing things, eliminating things, playing with light and shade, *etc.* Towards the end, it may not look like the photos at all. I could never understand why some artists shrank from using photographs. Everybody uses photographs if they are at all interested in realism. [But] if you have a subject that does not change much and you are able to work in the field, it can be a wonderful alternative to photography. The real thing is great and has the added benefit of being out in nature with the smells, sounds, and general fresh ambience. The point is still the same – good reference for your painting – whether in the field or from photos.

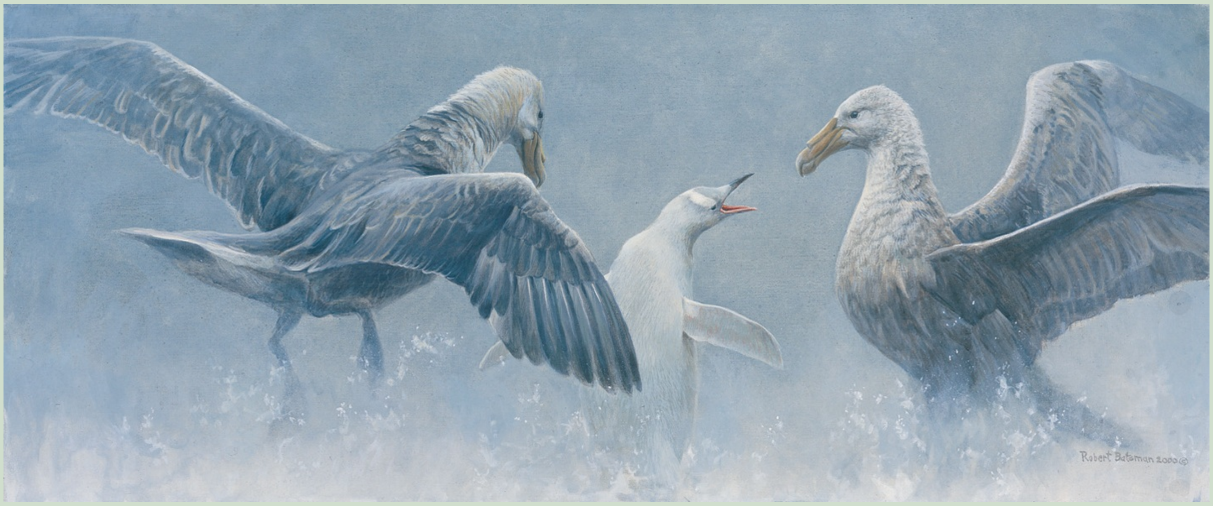
The sense of space is shown by air. And air neutralizes tone and colour. The further away, the paler the darks and the duller the light areas appear. To create my misty effects I use a foam rubber sponge with a thin wash of white, sometimes adding a bit of raw umber or Payne’s grey or yellow ochre depending on whether there is mist or dust, *etc.* I pat it until dry. When a paler colour is put over dark, it always looks dead purplish, so I paint it paler than it will end up, then bring it back to life with a very thin, darker wash.

You must not be a slave to the colour or tone of the creature. Bald eagles have more or less white heads and black wings but the highlighted parts will be paler and the shaded parts will be darker than the actual colour of a flat skin. I have shown an eagle with a charcoal throat that is darker than the highlights on the wing. All parts of the painting should have consistent light and shadow including the creature and the habitat. For a given angle of surface, the light and tone would be the same. Therefore if a surface is at a different angle, the tone will be different.

GENTOO PENGUIN

The artist describes the background to the painting:

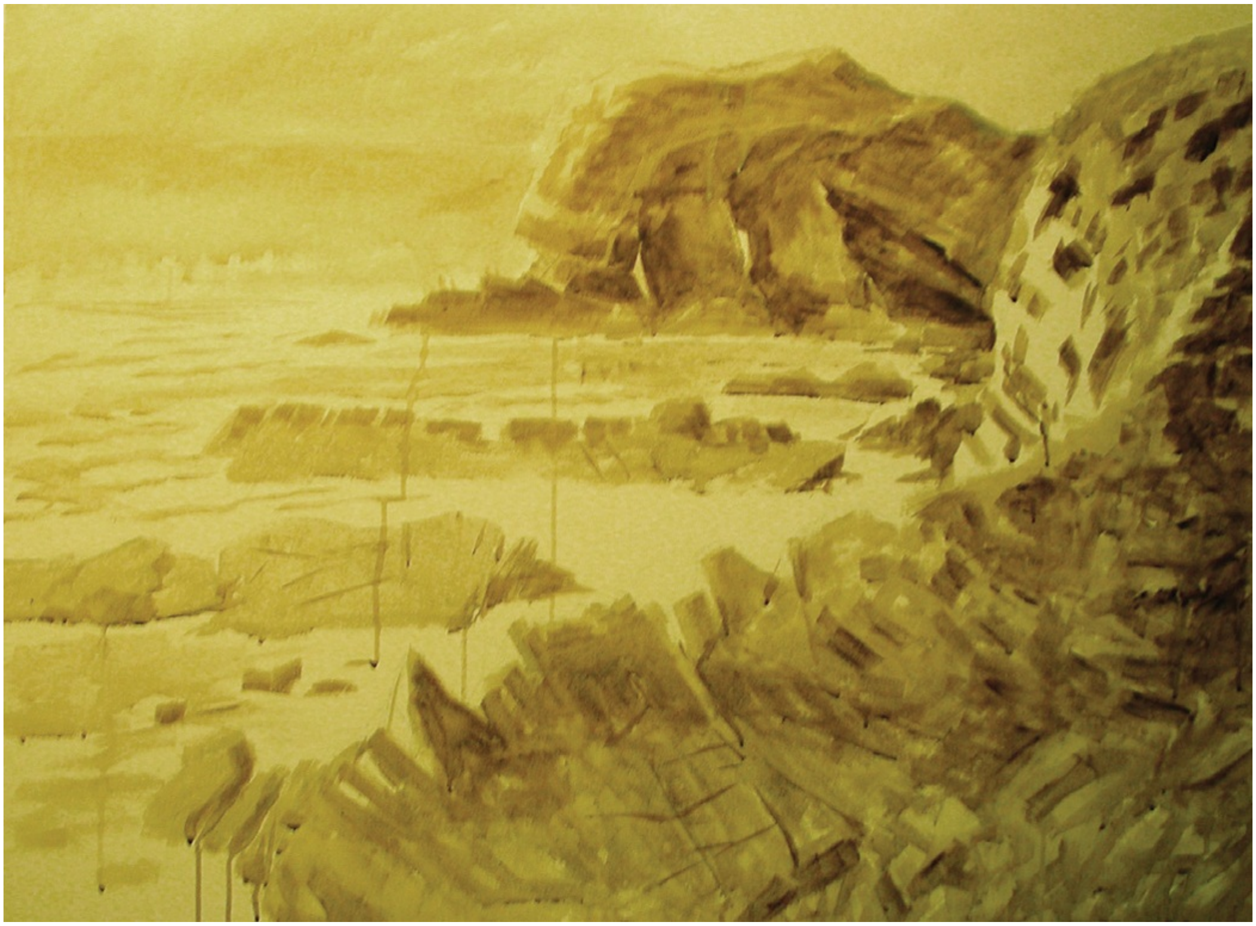
I saw this scene take place in Antarctica. Two giant petrels were attacking an albino Gentoo penguin. I should not admit it but giant petrels are among my favourite birds. Their ugly faces are actually quite interesting to draw or paint. At any rate they made suitable villains for this piece since they were picking on this particular penguin because it was different. It is in a way a comment on racism and bullying. This story did have a happy ending. The little penguin courageously continued to fight them off and they eventually gave up.

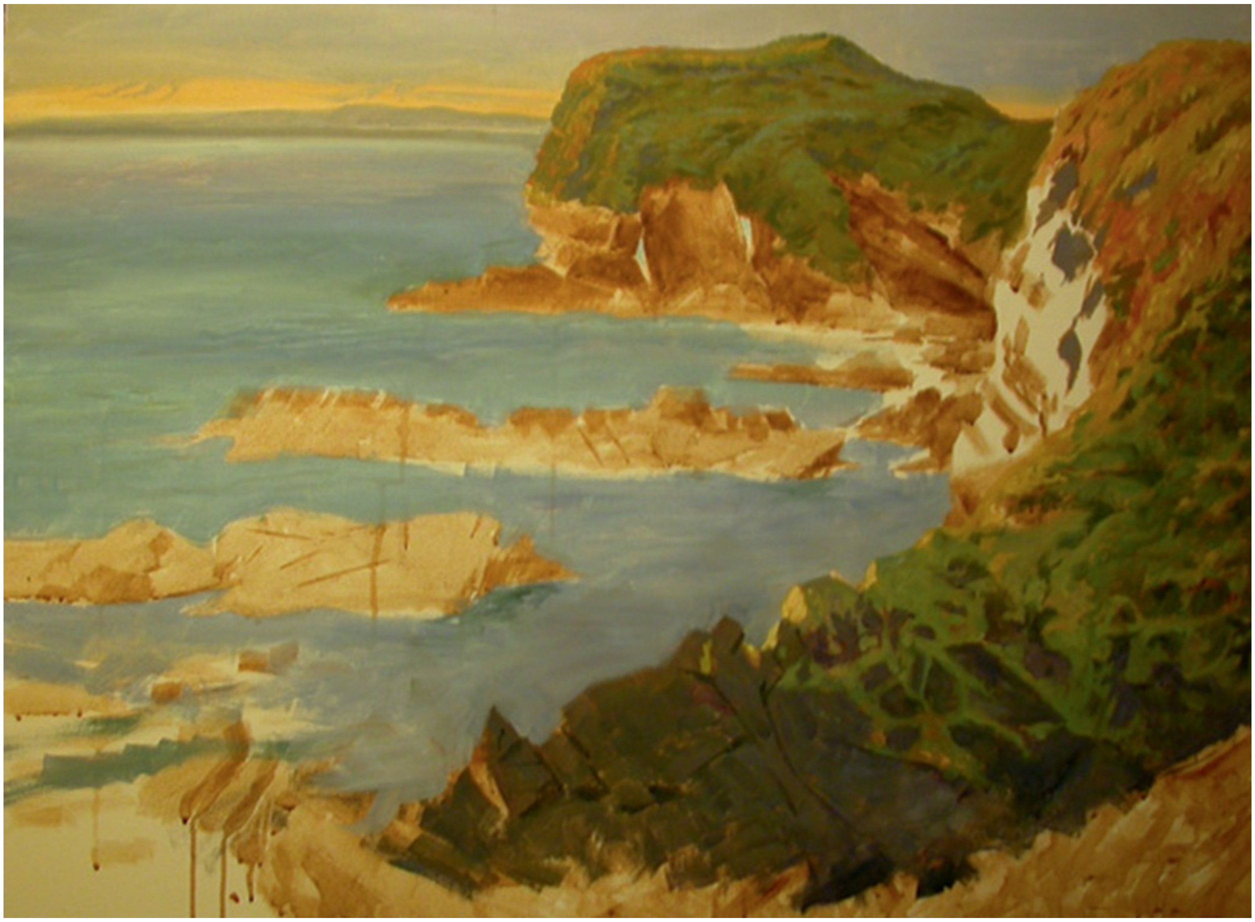


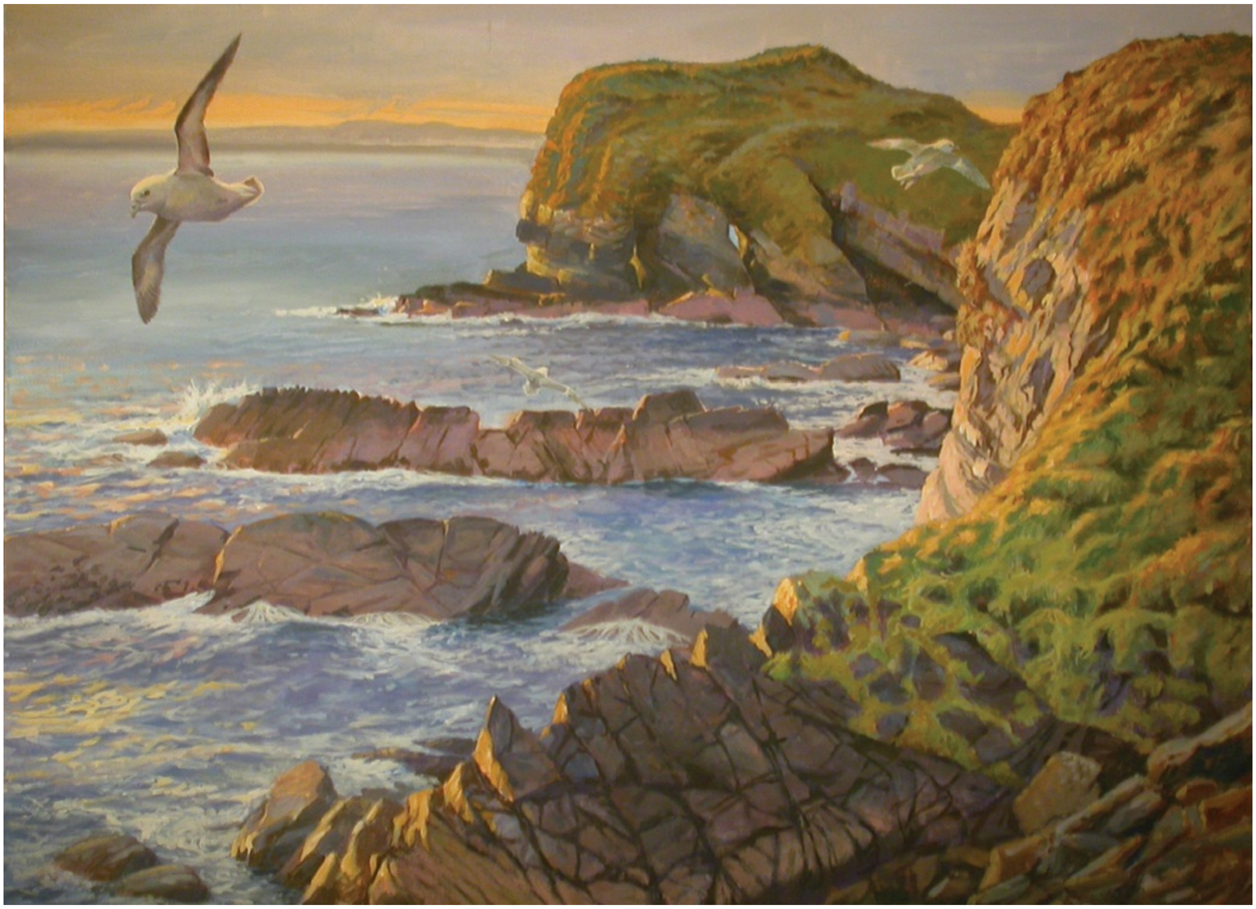
Robert Bateman: *Gentoo Penguin*. 20 × 48in, acrylic on canvas.

Tim Wootton

This painting of Harraborough Head in Orkney is painted using the grisaille method. The headland is very distinctive and I wanted to keep faithful to that but I also wanted to introduce very dramatic lighting to give the piece an ‘edge of the world’ flavour. The fulmars are symbolic of that transition between ocean and land.







Tim Wootton: *Harraborough Head and Fulmars*.

The first image shows the sepia monochrome grisaille under-painting. I kept the paint quite thin and built up the depth of value by adding more layers of thin paint, regularly rubbing areas of paint away with a rough cloth. All of the canvas is covered with at least some paint, lowering the key of the painting.

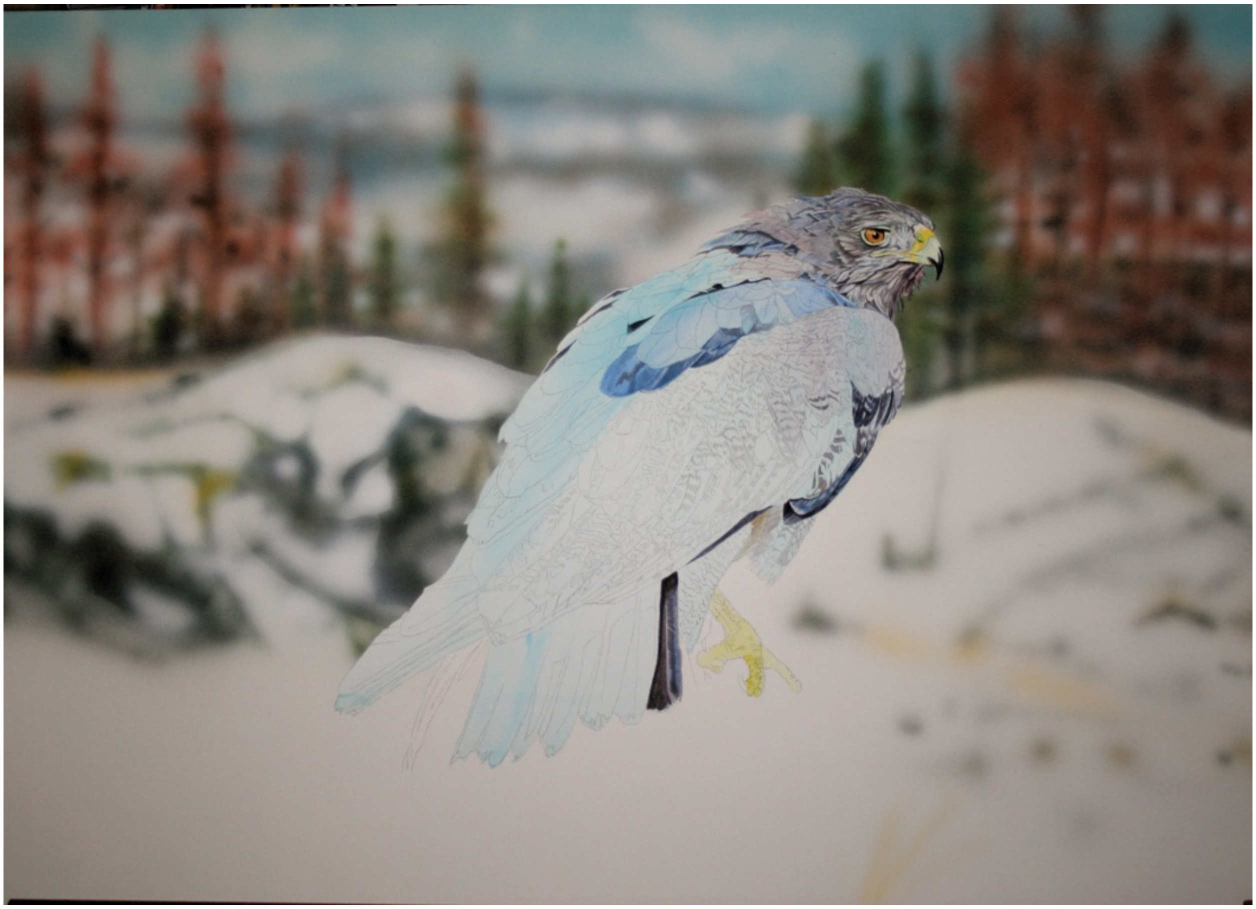
The second image shows the blocking in of the hues and how the colours relate to the underlying values. The heavier paint and deeper hues start to emphasize the shadow areas whilst there are still zones of light under-painting exposed to keep the balance.

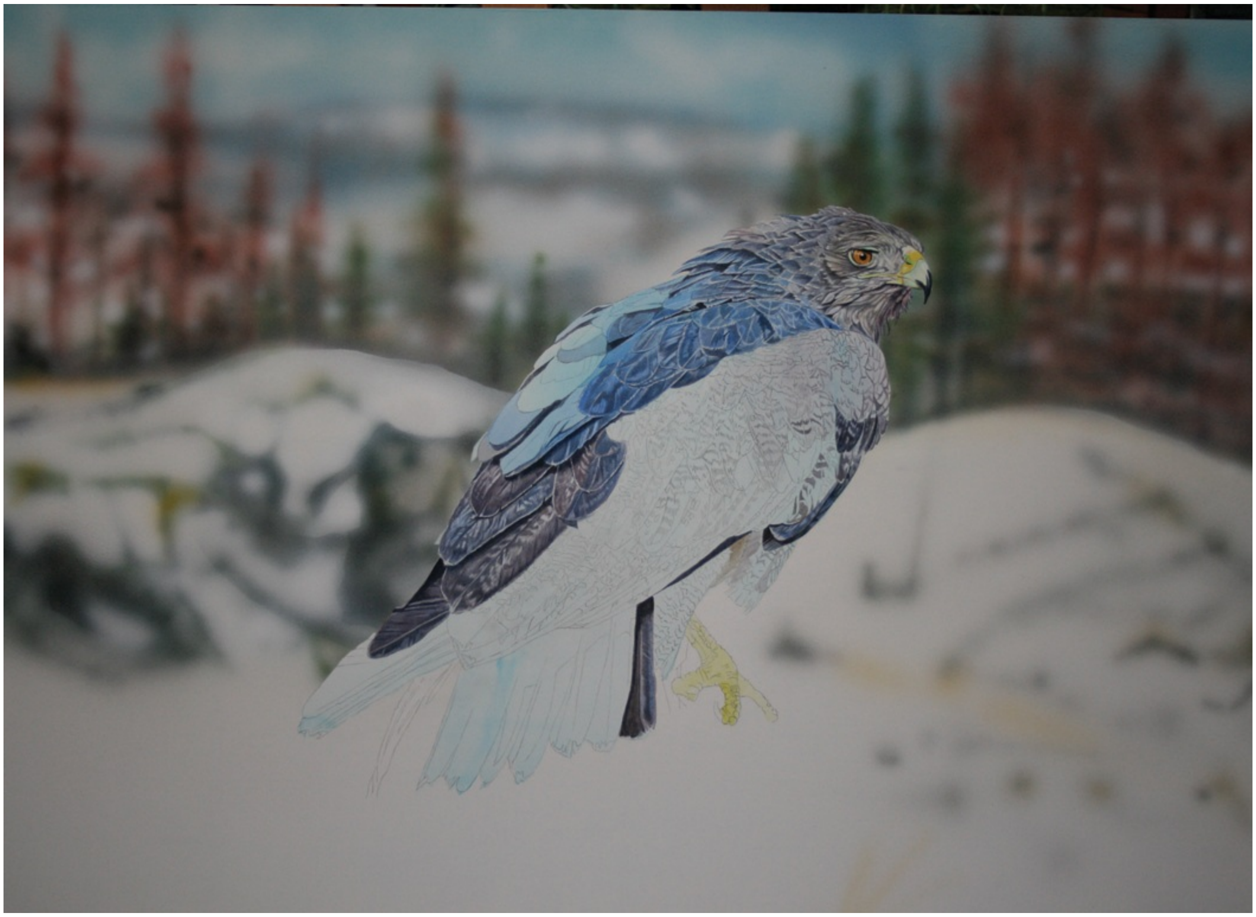
The finished work has warm pinky-gold hues laid over the highlighted parts where the low setting sun catches the face of the rocks. Similar rim-lighting (just the outer edges of the object are lit, the rest in shadow) is employed on the nearest bird and slightly more understated tones deeper into the picture.

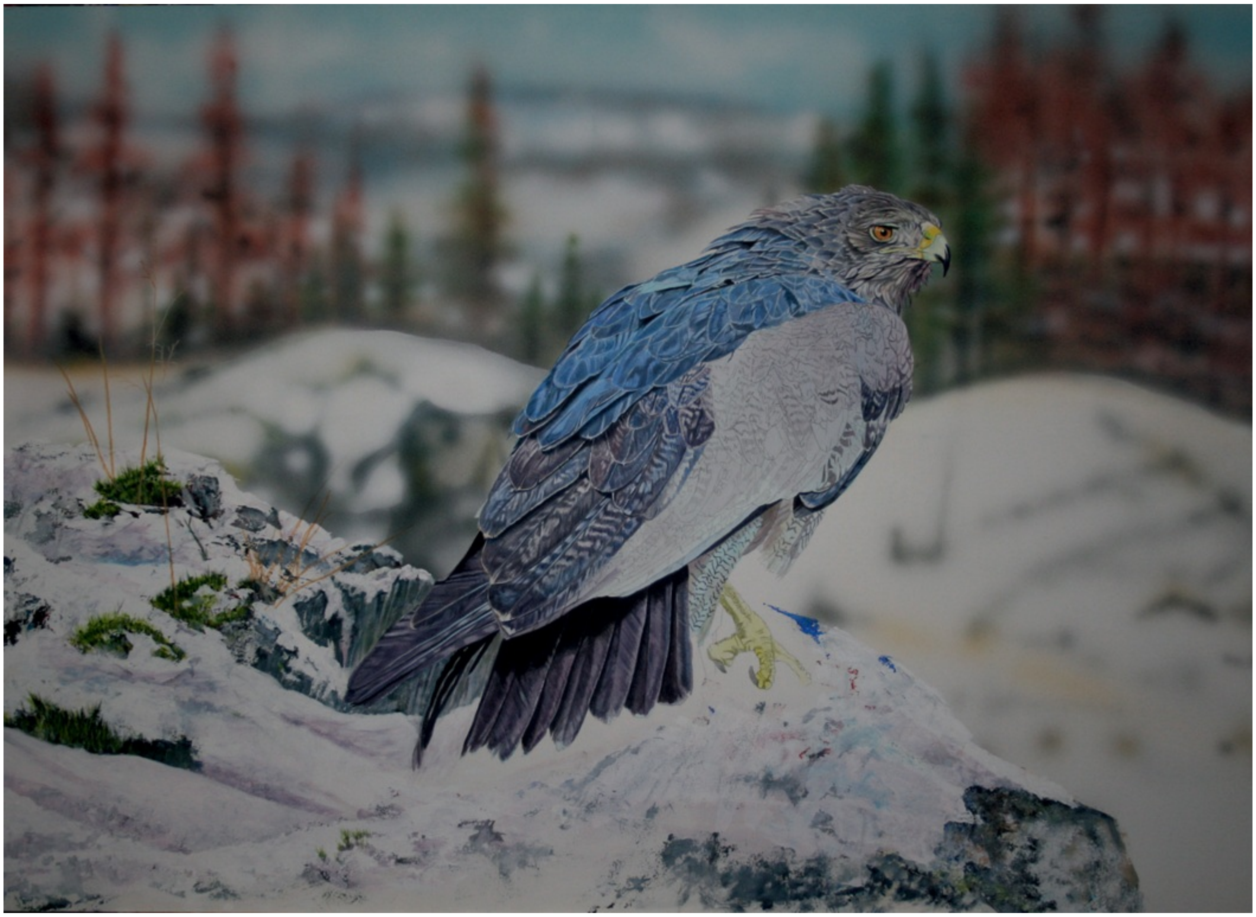
Paul Hawkyard

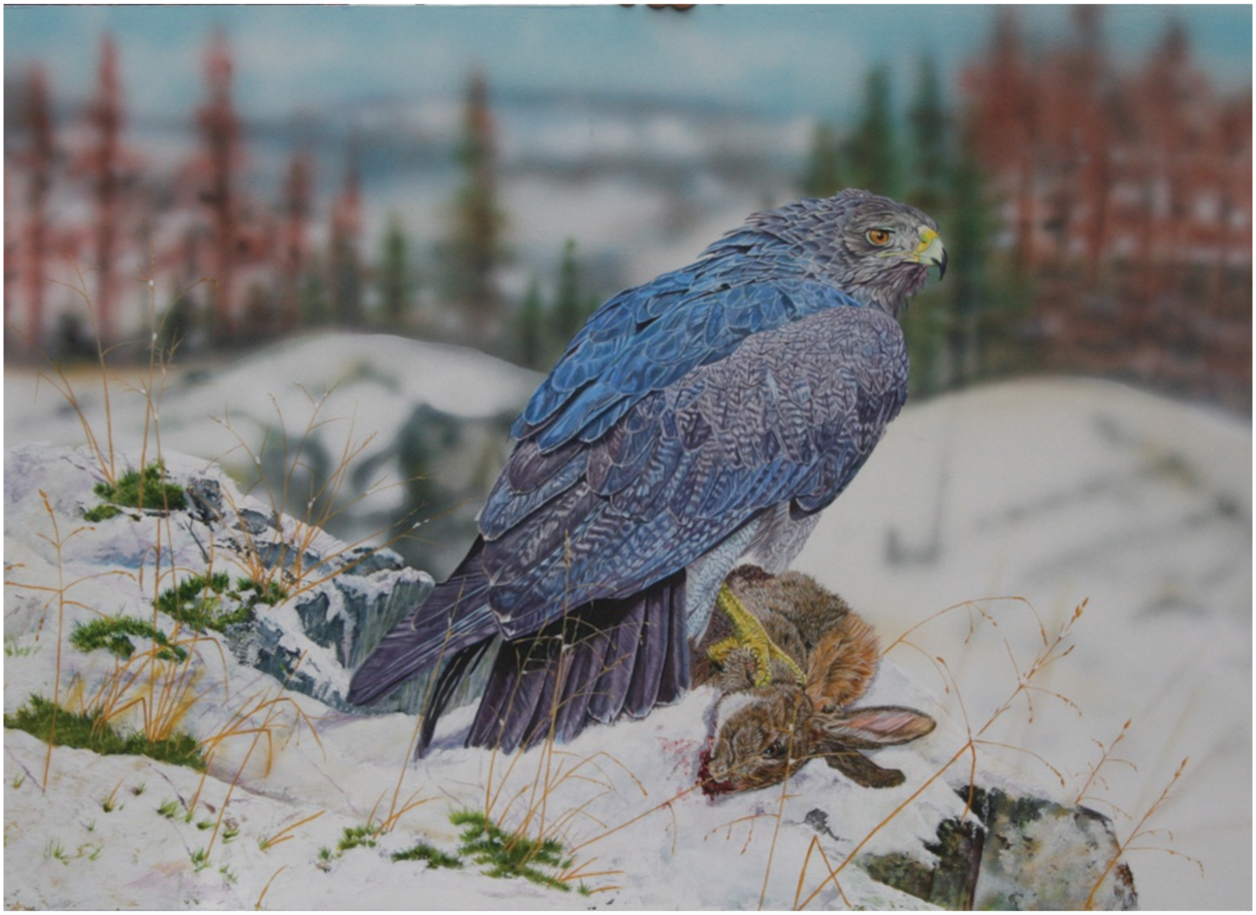
As a support I use MDF board. This is gessoed both sides to stop the board warping. The side I am working on takes four to five coats of gesso with a light sanding after the last coat. This gives me a fairly smooth surface to work on. I then transfer my prepared drawing onto the board and fill in the rest of the composition very lightly in pencil. The reference photograph was taken in the aviary. I mask off the image of the bird using masking film and use an airbrush to paint the background. I deliberately spray the background to make it look out of focus as I want the attention to be centred on the bird. I finish off with a couple of coats of titanium white to subdue the colours.

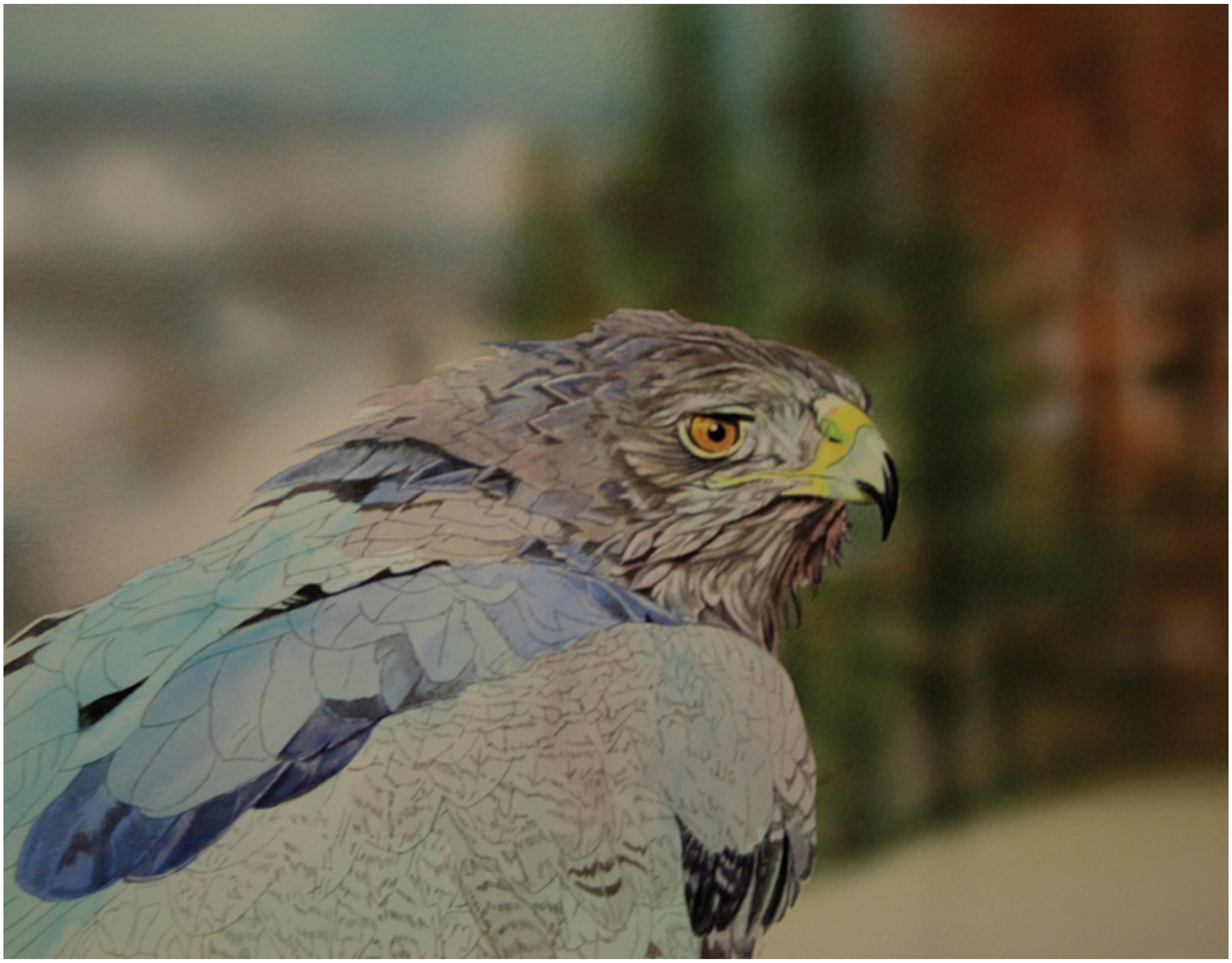
I remove the masking to start work on the bird. Using very watered down ultramarine blue I cover the entire image of the bird, except for the feet, cere, beak and eye. This seals in the pencil lines and gives me an overall colour that will ultimately shine through the over-painting. I then mix a mauve colour using ultramarine and brick red to glaze over the head. My next step is to work on the eye which helps to bring the painting to life, ensuring I capture the highlights in the eye accurately. These are often more than just a white dot in the pupil and consist of different shades and reflections. The shadow from the brow is painted in transparent layers forming a translucent effect. I then add the drop shadows for the feathering on the head and proceed to fill in the detail.

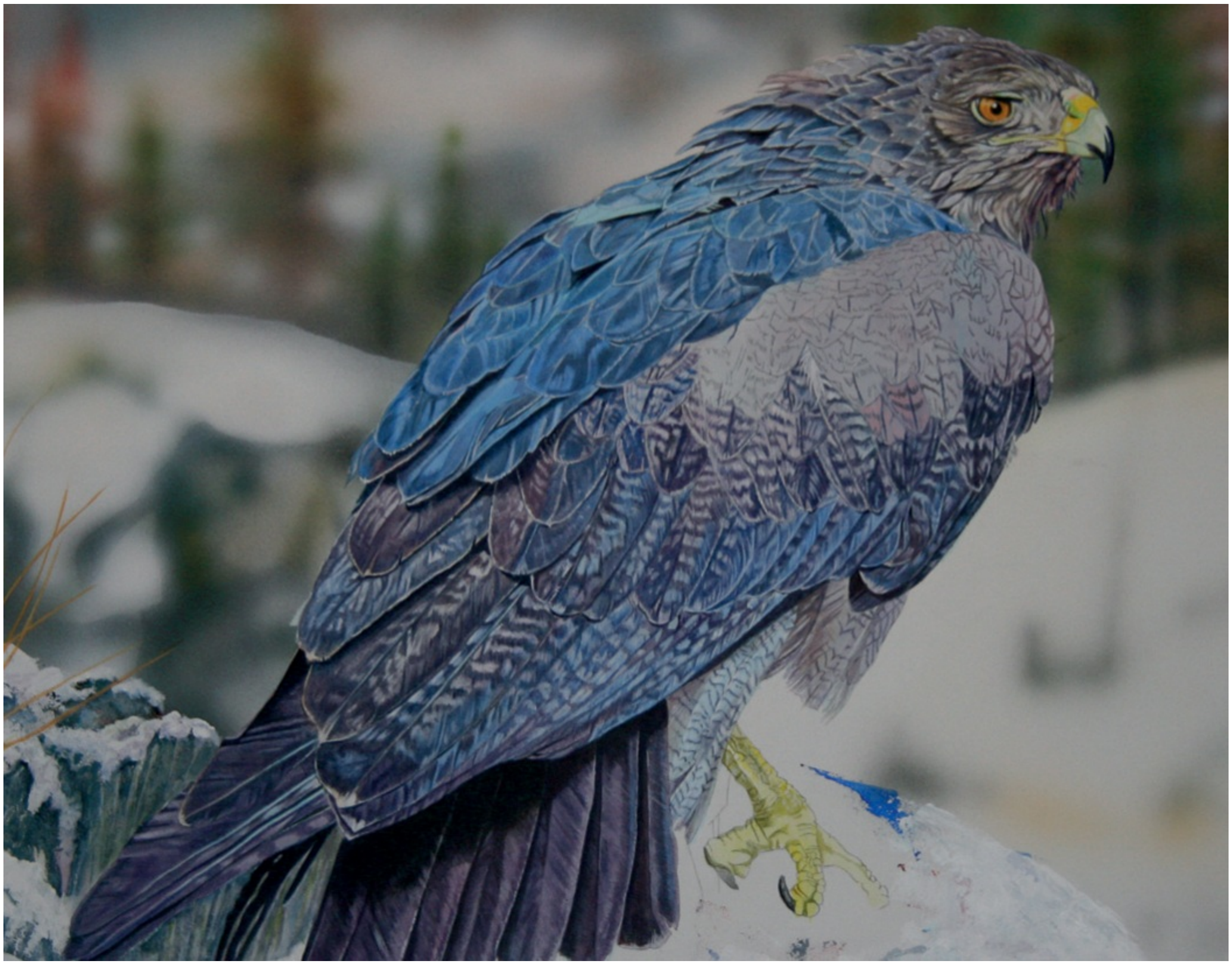


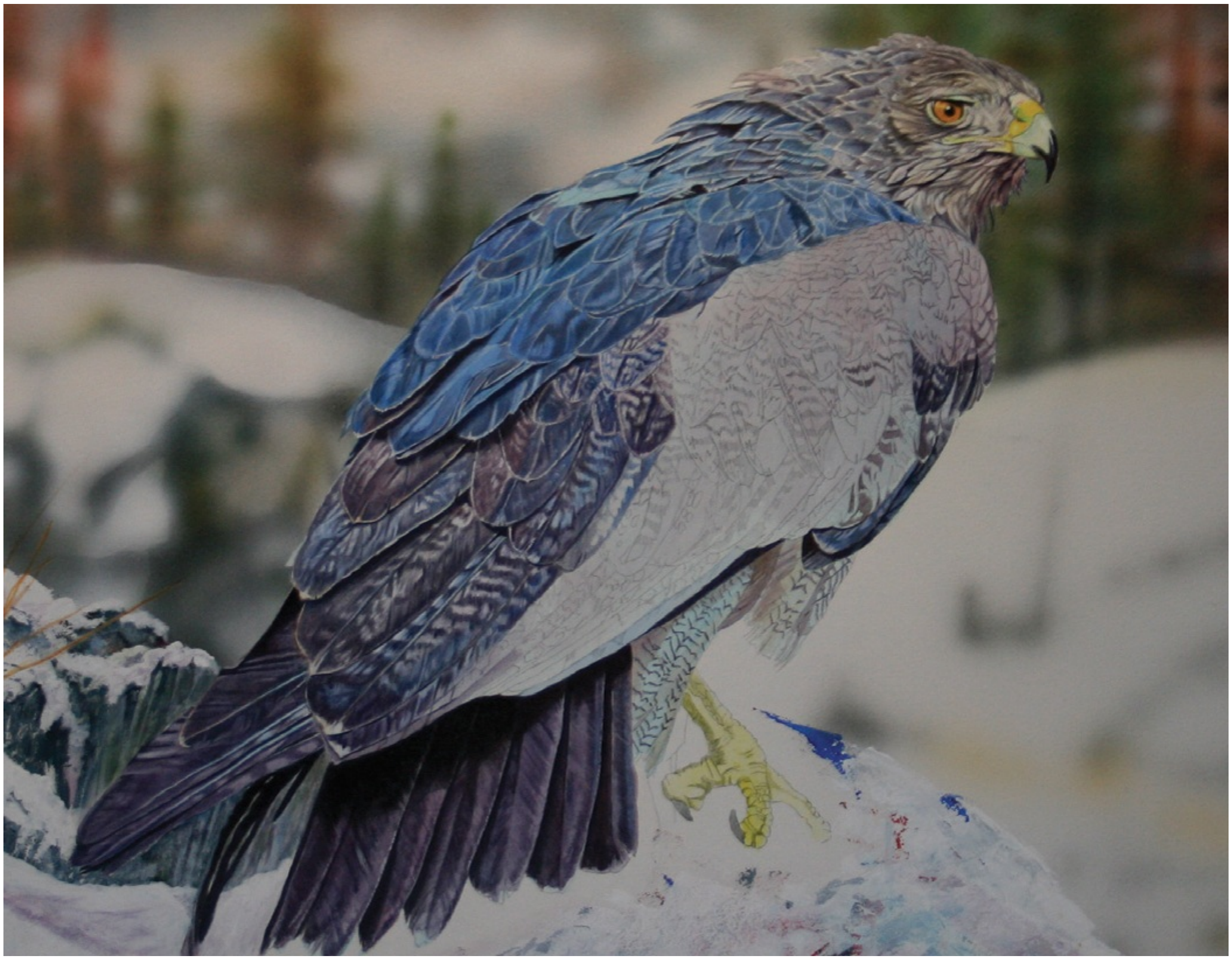












Paul Hawkyard: *Chilean Blue Eagle*.

On completing the head I start to work down the body. Mixing various shades of blue, I paint the feathers one at a time, edging them and adding some detail with titanium white and blue glazing to soften the brightness of the white. I add shadows to the next feather down and continue on down the body. Some of the feathers are a mauve colour. I mix various shades and work on the feathers in the same way. I use burnt umber and ultramarine blue to mix a dark/black to strengthen the shadows.

At this point painting feathers becomes very tedious and so I decide to address the foreground landscape; I under-paint the whole of the background using the same mauve as on the feathers, which helps to harmonize the piece. Once dry, using a knife and an impasto technique I scrape on titanium white and then remove from some areas – that adds shape and shadow to the snow. While the paint's still wet I scrape out shape and shadow to the snow. While the paint's still wet I scrape out areas where the rock face shows through. I add light shadows under the thick paint that represents the snow. Again using the same colours as the bird's plumage I paint the rock face. Once this is dry I use a natural sponge to give the rocks some texture. I use a mixture of sap green for the grass, changing the hues by adding blues and yellows. I paint these quite thickly and then I add more purple shadows in the snow. After this welcome break, I'm ready to take on more feather work!

I continue round the body as before and sketch in the missing part of the composition: the rabbit. I originally wanted to paint this bird in its typical pose sitting in a tree, clutching a snake. However, as the bird was used for falconry purposes, the client requested it was painted with the humble rabbit. The rabbit is undercoated with raw sienna. The shadows that indicate the undulation of the fur are painted in quite dark using burnt umber and ultramarine. Using raw umber I roughly paint in the fur, being mindful of the direction it grows. I mark out the tips of the fur in titanium white, finishing with glazes of raw sienna, raw umber and burnt sienna. When I paint hawks' feet I am always aware they are the most formidable part of the bird raptor. Using a very small brush, I paint every scale. I'm slightly apprehensive when it comes to painting the blood; however I felt it added to the drama of the piece.

To finish I add some dead grasses. Then poured a gin and tonic and called it a day!

PAINTING IN OILS

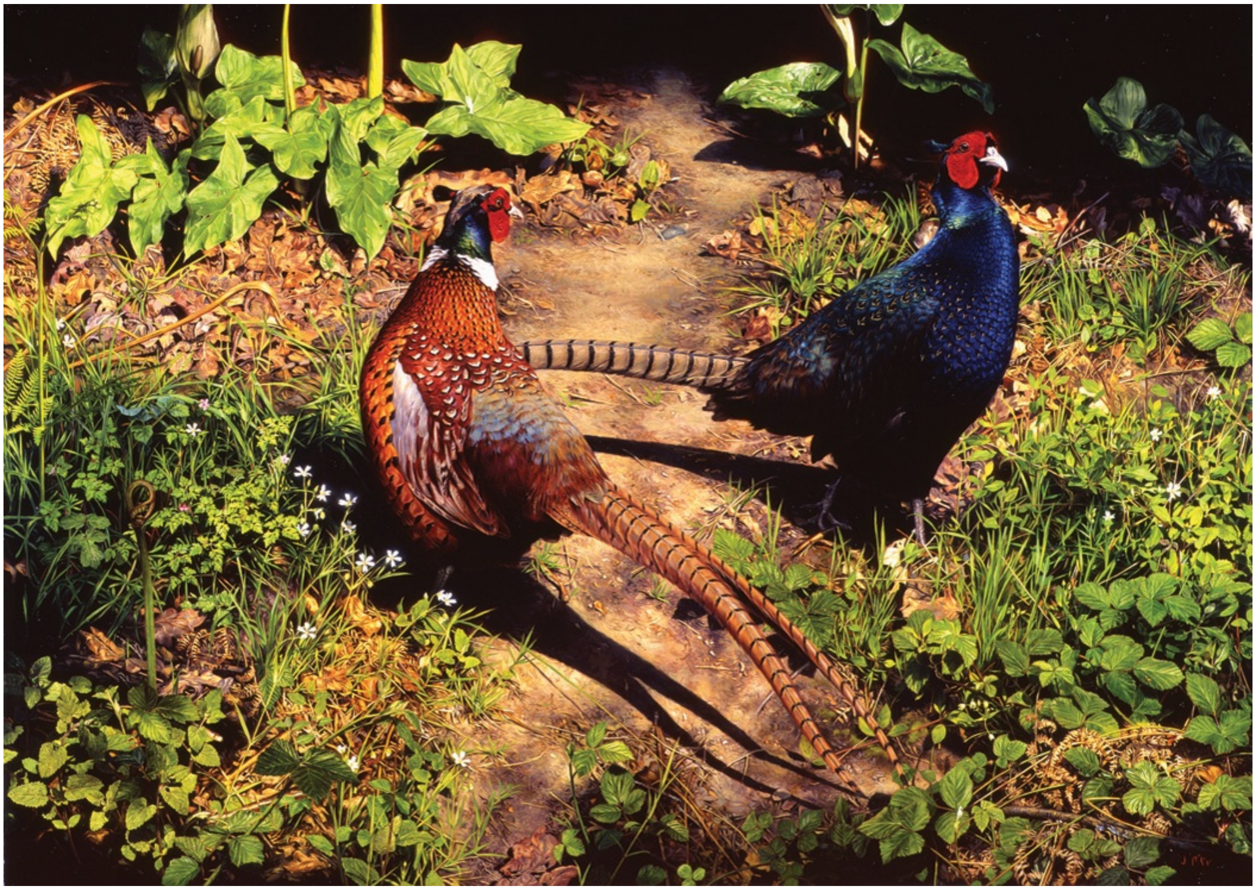
Jonathan Pointer

Inspiration always comes from nature itself but my type of painting, due to the length of time spent on a canvas and attention to realism, means I only paint in the studio. Field trips, however, are a vital element in my work. I have to see the subject matter I'm painting and its environment to understand how to convincingly recreate it in paint and of course gain inspiration to initially spark the creation of a painting.

On field trips I try and immerse myself watching the subject and gathering reference for the different elements of the painting, therefore I spend a lot of time with a camera, photographing interesting plants, rocks and how light affects these and the animal or bird in different interesting poses.

I never work from just one photograph. To replicate a photograph to the point where foreground and background is blurred as in a photograph I feel is a pointless exercise. I often have a preconceived idea of what I would like to paint and then gather the photographs for that painting to flesh out the idea and allow me to paint with the kind of realism I cannot get from field sketching. A large painting with lots going on will use dozens of different photos which I pull together in the piece.

I try and keep my painting technique as simple as possible. I use oil paints both for the wonderful richness of colour and because they are so versatile; used thinly creating a smooth surface, or an impasto way creating a chunkier, rougher surface ideal for earth or rock. I paint on canvas which is gessoed with three or four coats then sanded. Gesso can be applied with a variety of textures depending on final technique. When the painting is varnished, the initial gesso texture is more apparent and I believe adds something to the surface of the painting, preferable to uniform textured weave which can distract the eye.



Jonathan Pointer: *Signs of Spring*.

I paint with sizes 2 to 8 watercolour brushes for my oil paints. Because my work is intricate, I find the greater flexibility of this brush delivers the paint more smoothly to the canvas than the stiffer, less flexible hog's hair brushes often associated with oil painting. Larges brushes are sometimes used for blocking in big areas.

I first start by drawing out the key elements of my picture onto the canvas with a medium soft pencil, this allows me an early indication that all is well with composition, proportions and the idea itself before I commit weeks or months of effort to the painting.

I apply mid tones selectively: green mid tone for grass or vegetation, brown mid tones for earth *etc.* Then I'll begin applying the detail; I paint what interests me most rather than painting backgrounds before foregrounds. By painting my favourite bits first, I reason I'll try extra hard on the less inviting, more laborious elements in the painting for fear of ruining the good bits!

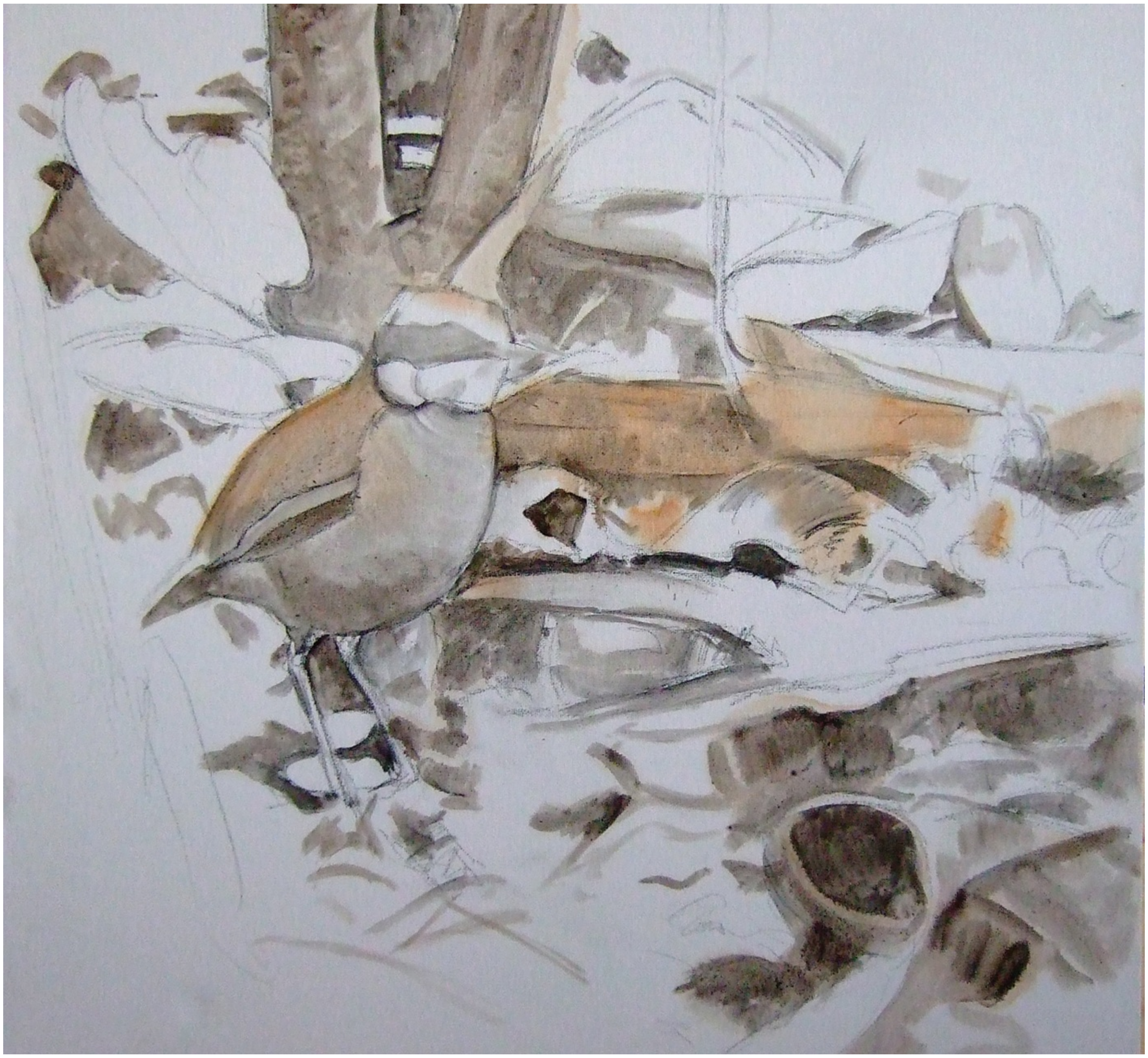
Gather a group of artists in a room and ask them their technique in how

Gather a group of artists in a room and ask them their technique in how to varnish a painting the right way and you are guaranteed a debate! I know some artists who swear by spray varnishes and others who heat their varnish before applying it to the painting. I always varnish my paintings, usually three or four times with liquid varnish that is applied with a large, clean, flat-headed brush. When the varnish is uniformly transparent over the whole, I know that the painting is complete. If you examine your painting from a low angle using a handy light source you can see if the varnish is evenly applied.

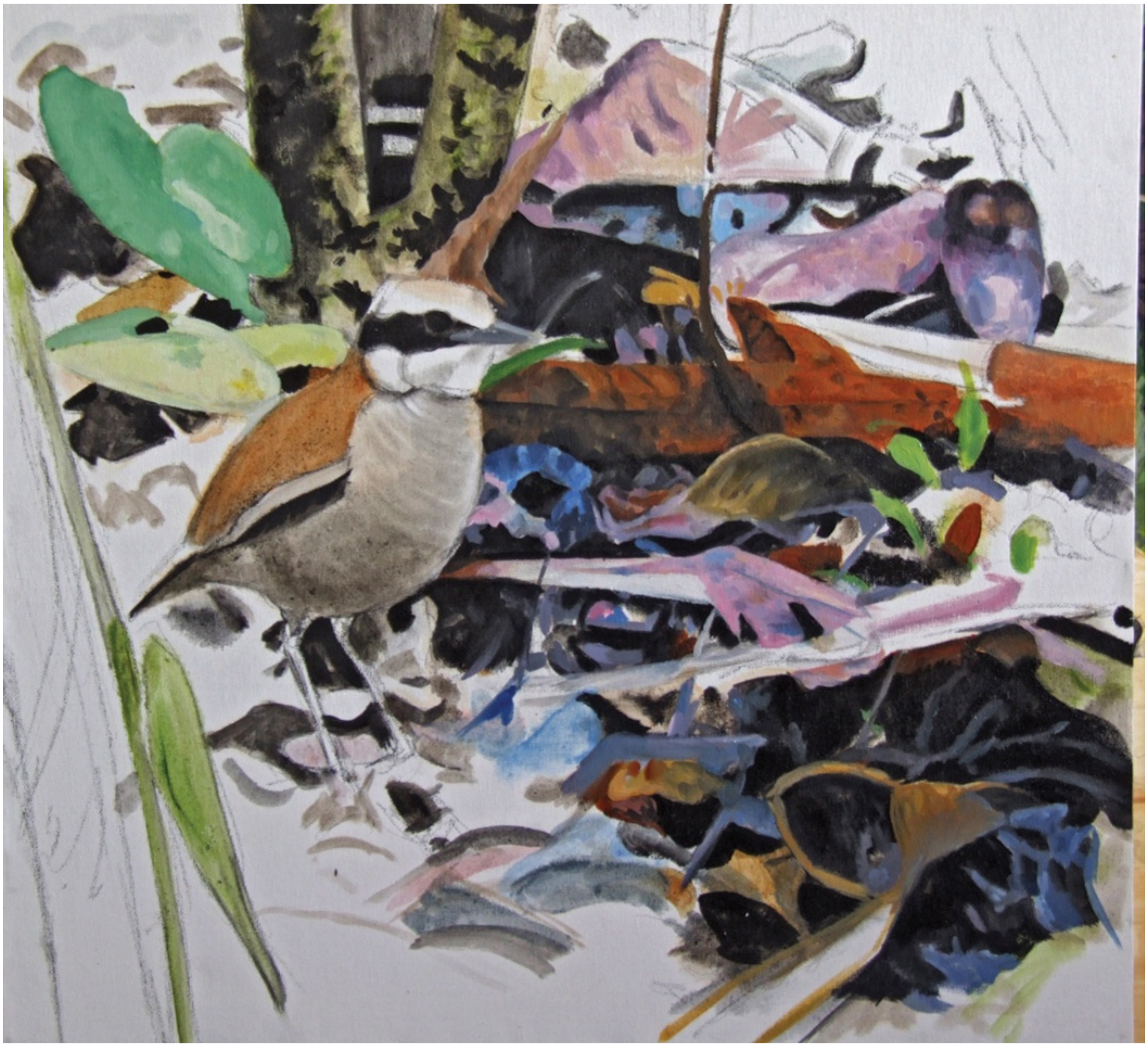
I spend months on individual paintings. I’m not a slow painter, but being interested in all the elements of nature means that I devote as much time to painting plants, leaf litter and rocks. I’m often asked how I have the patience for such long stints on a single painting. Well I have a lot more patience now than when I first started. So patience is in part learned, like technique, but it is true that those paintings that take months can grind me down. To stop this happening I usually have several paintings on the easel at any one time. When I feel my concentration is slipping I can move onto a new painting for a time before returning refreshed to the larger painting.

Mark Andrews

This Asian rainforest denizen is one of the most incredible birds I’ve ever seen, the eyebrow glows like fire in the forest gloom. It’s a bird I just had to paint and felt oils were the best way to convey the staggering vivid colours of the bird I saw – a little bundle of magic!

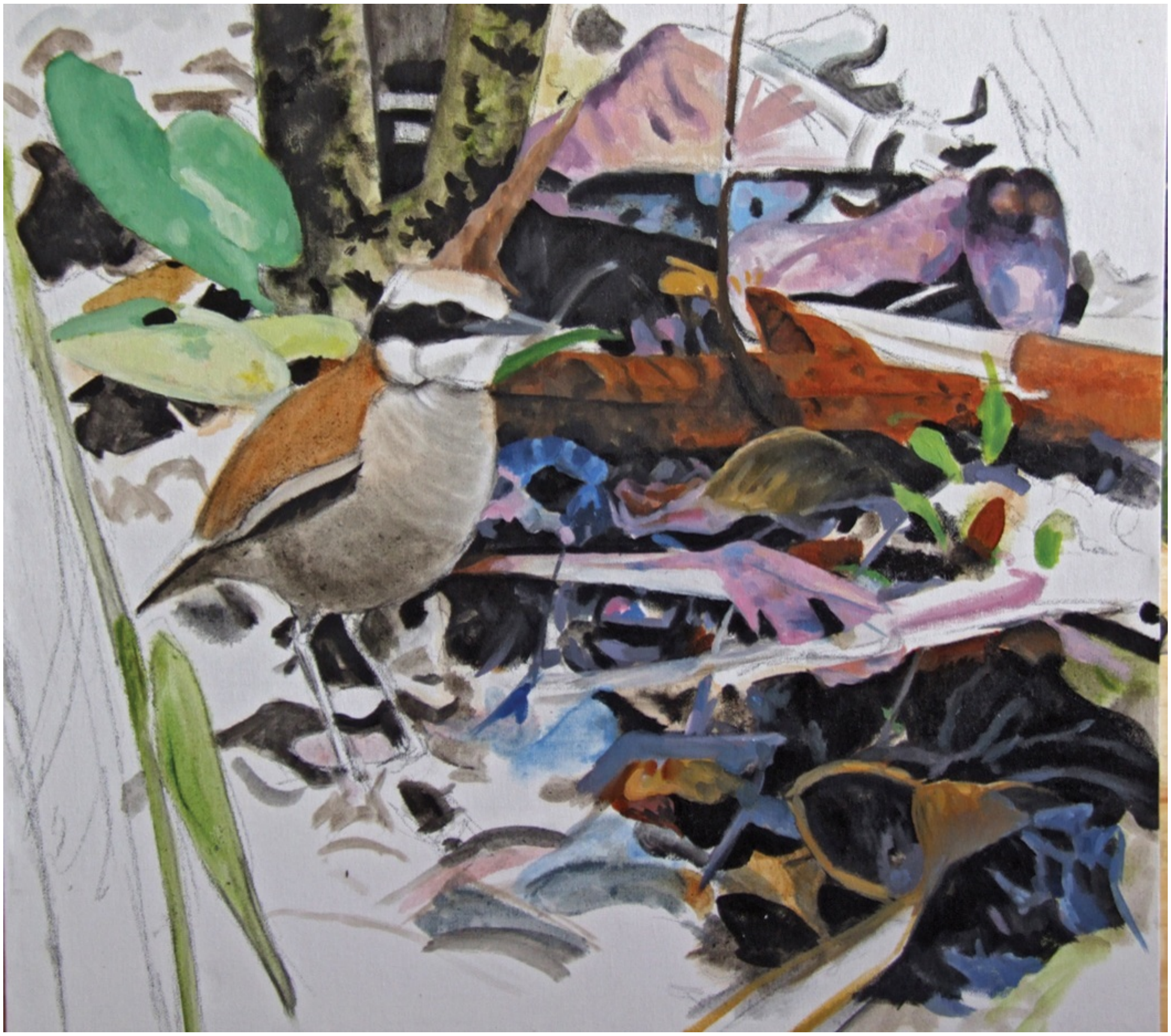


Mark Andrews: banded pitta. Oil on panel; initial sketch and wash.

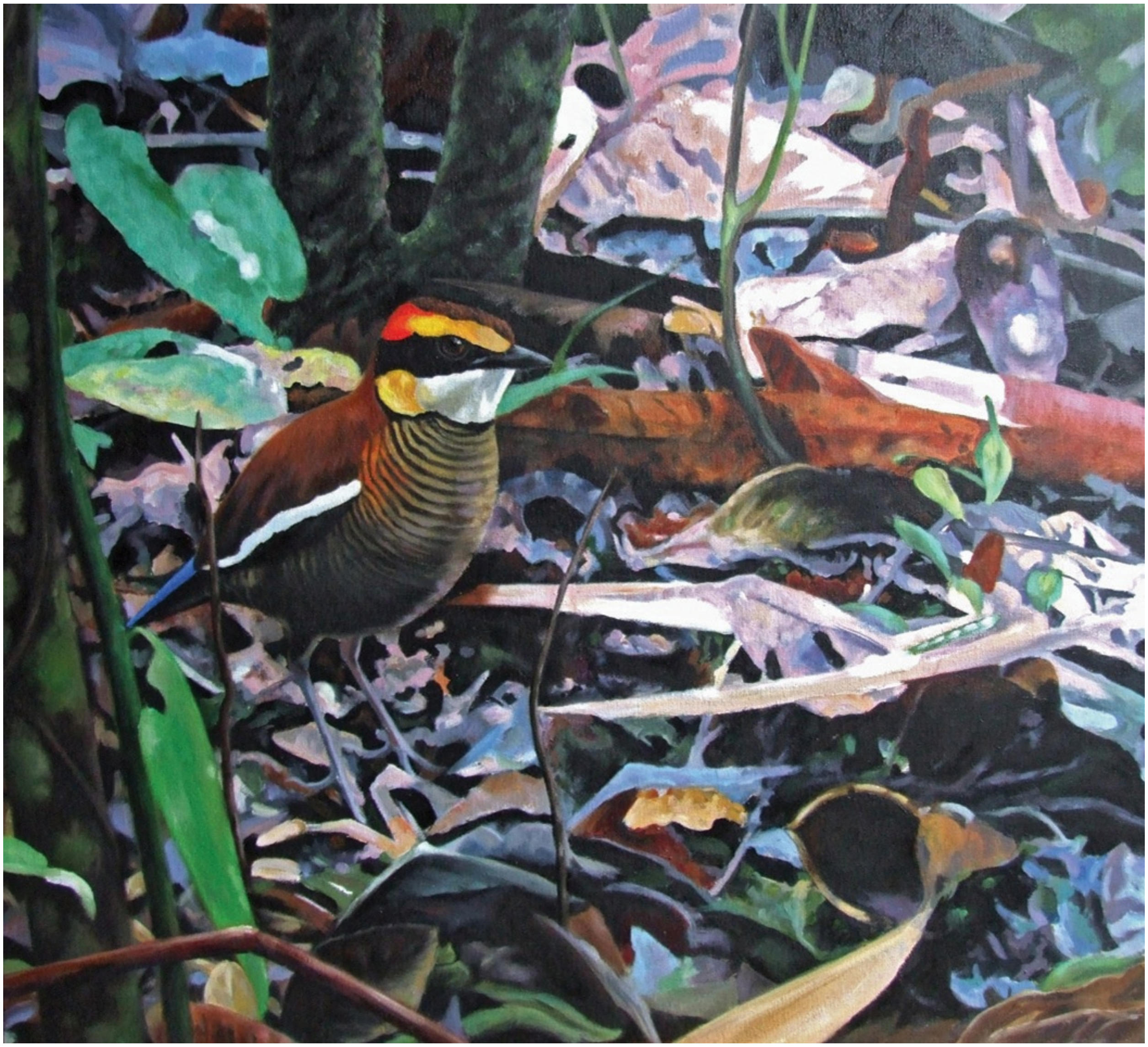


Adding depth: to keep the energy in the painting the artist moves across the painting, working on different areas simultaneously. This approach also helps to keep the balance in the piece.

Besides being a wildlife artist Mark is a photographer and an Ecological Tour Leader and has been fortunate to visit many special and exotic locations. Photographs are invaluable for habitat reference and he takes many pictures on his trips when time with clients doesn't allow much opportunity for some traditional sketching. A few quick preliminary sketches are made to get the balance of the picture and then he's straight into the painting. The image is lightly sketched onto the canvas using pencil and charcoal and then the drawing is accentuated using a thin wash of oil paint diluted with white spirit. At this stage a few tones are introduced to set the overall value balance and to aid navigating the piece.



Building levels: at this stage the darkest areas are intensified, which emphasizes the sunlit patches.



Mark Andrews: banded pitta. Oil on canvas. The final stage includes detailing the bird: working on that incredible eyestripe, the 'firebrow', painting the bands across the bird's breast and adding extra highlights to fine-tune the balance.

The dark forest and leaf litter is always a challenge for me and in this case the eye was most certainly drawn to the bird's remarkable pattern. My vision of this painting had softer detail around the bird as the vegetation merges and entwines around it. Working loosely, this approach helps me to keep the balance in the piece and helps me focus on the areas that are missing, the jump from the image in the mind to the piece on canvas.

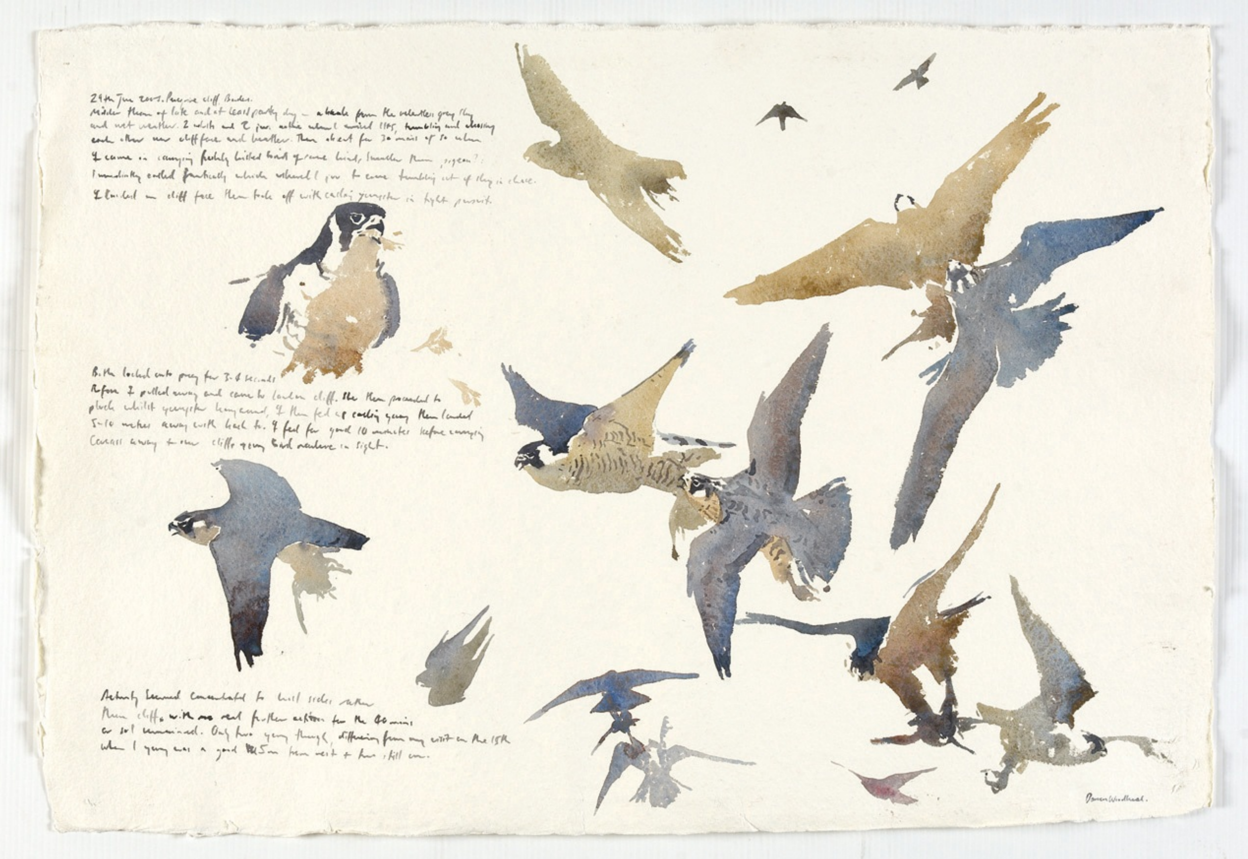
I need to bring the bird out a little more, and add some depth and distance to the rear; the leaf litter shadows are added to with highlights of mauves, blues and pinks to balance, colours I often see with half-closed eyes when working in rainforests, and ones which complement the focal point.

Because of the nature of the environment where these birds are found, it can be pretty dark on the forest floor so some of the highlights are where shafts of light percolate through and others are reflected light. The bird is also being softly lit by reflected light on its underside, something you often see on terrestrial forest birds creating a slight ‘aura’, enhancing the observation and the experience, something I was keen to portray here.

THE PROCESS OF MAKING PICTURES

Darren Woodhead

As an artist, I have and always will work outside in the field. I find this is the only way that I can work. Whilst growing up it was hard to find paintings that kept the life of what I saw as a young naturalist, so many images were lifeless and staged. But I found myself looking at paintings and drawings from artists such as Eric Ennion, Charles Tunnicliffe and more recently John Busby and David Measures that encompassed the energy of the moving object and challenged the early works that I found lacking. It seemed so natural and easy, deep in every line and every mark of the drawings, the one thing that stood out was the knowledge and confidence the artists had with their subjects. There was also a sense of honesty that I found captivating.



Darren Woodhead: peregrine studies (watercolour).

Working outside obviously has its pitfalls. There is no time for deliberation and worry, any image has to happen speedily and instinctively. Nothing ever stays for a specific length of time and subjects are always moving or going about their daily lives with an eventual disregard for the figure nearby. Never do birds or animals stand on plinths and pose as we should like them to do. They are concentrating on feeding, migrating, resting and surviving. It would be a shame if they did pose for us. That excitement and essence that makes seeing something that we do not normally see, special, would be lost. I am of the view that however we are lucky enough to see animals or natural history, then surely this is the way they should be described and scripted. This feeling for the continual world going on around, together with the life and energy they exude, is what I would like my paintings to show and communicate.

I find that the greatest results come from a state of mind which is totally absorbed in work, when I am working without much thinking.

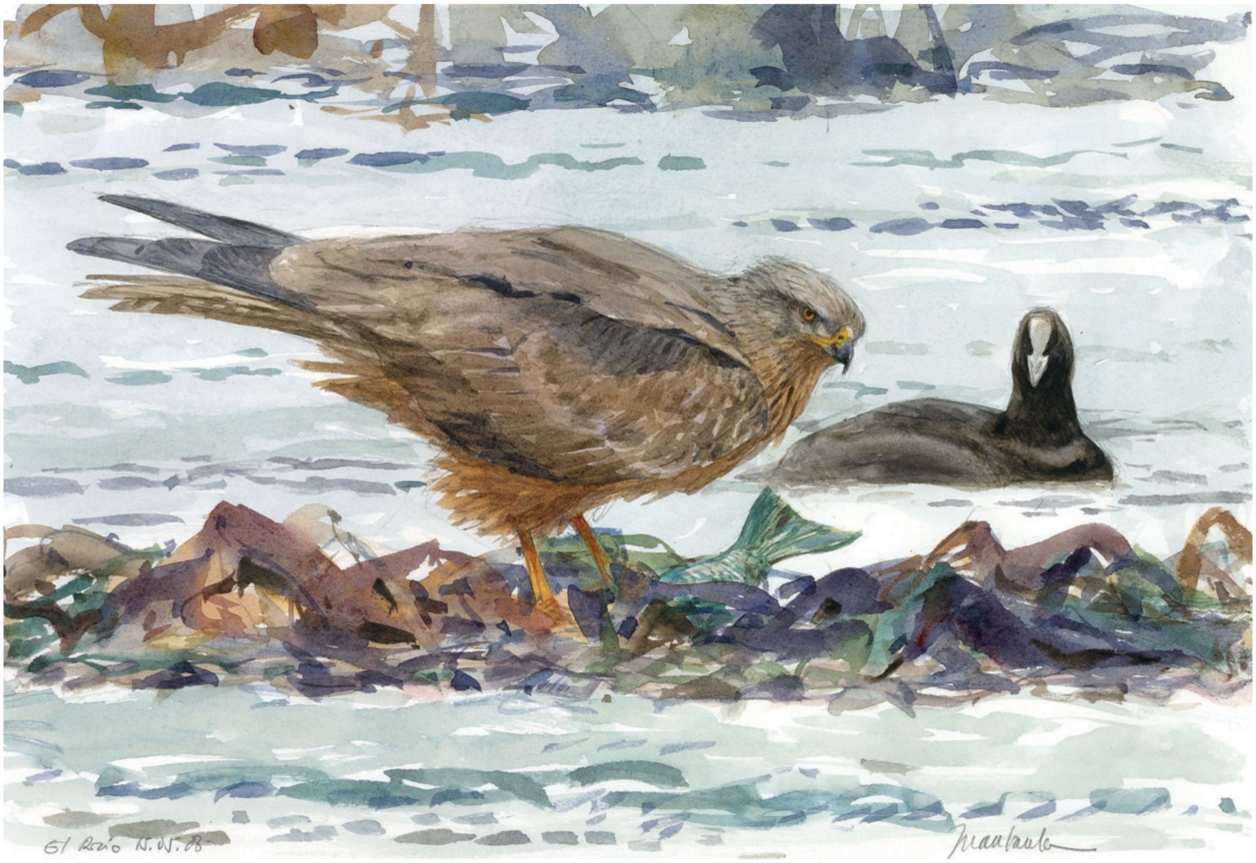
I carry a folder full of varying sheets of paper so that I'm never too concerned about the amount I use, therefore trying to encourage that freedom of thought and expression that will allow results to flow and materialize. For me becoming zoned into the atmosphere is part of the experience. I similarly find it amazing how one can be lost in a painting yet somehow intuitively aware of the goings on around. No doubt I miss so much but how often do I seem to just look up at the right moment to see a peregrine chasing thrushes above or roe deer tiptoeing through the undergrowth below; this always astounds me. Perhaps there is a certain state of mind that is open to what is happening around or perhaps it is just coincidence, whatever the cause these events have made so many days. As mentioned before, I never pass over the opportunity on to include these events as part of the image.

Extract from *Up River, The Song of the Esk* (Birlinn 2009).

Juan Varela

Much of my work is done on site, using a spotting scope and binoculars. I have developed some memorizing skills that prove to be very helpful when drawing animals in motion; this and the ability to draw very quickly are my main tools to produce reliable bird sketches.

Unless I find some unexpected motif that may put me to work quickly, I usually sit near a convenient spot – a pond, a shore or any bird-frequented place – and wait to see what happens. I normally start by hand warming exercises like making quick contour lines or parts of the animals I see, filling some pages of the sketchbook before I get in that ‘special mood’ when you forget about cold, mosquitoes, pebbles under your rear or whatever. Nothing else matters except the drawing which then starts to become almost automatic. I used to say to my art students that the distance from your sight to your hand through your brain is called ‘fear of mistakes’ – the longer the distance the more the mistakes.



Juan Varela: black kite and coot. Field painting. (First published in *Entre Mar y Tierra/Between Sea and Land*, Lynx Edicions, Barcelona.)

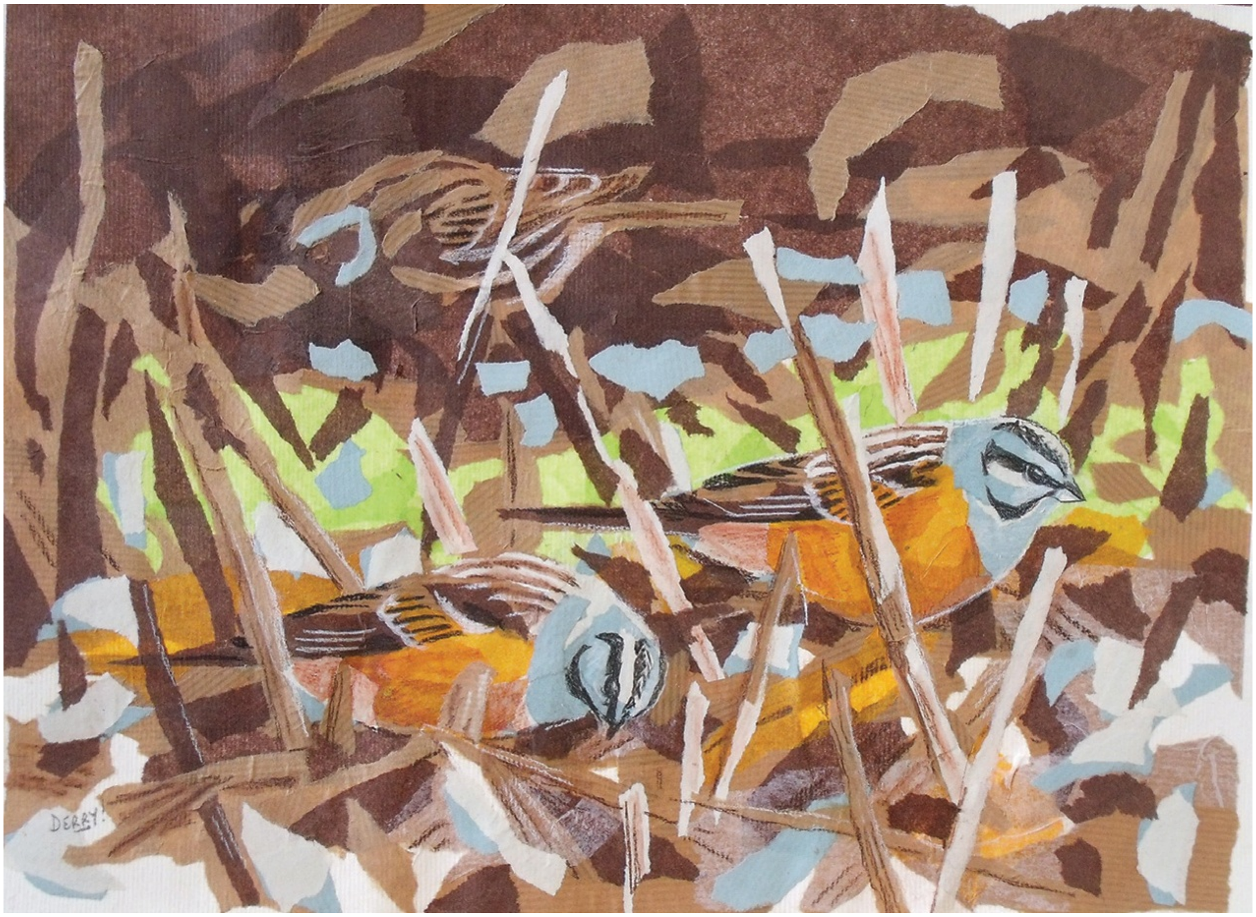
The painting process is different from drawing in nature. I obviously try to give my best when I'm painting, but I'm more interested in the process itself than in the final result as it's during the actual process that you learn and discover new ways for your art. When you show your finished paintings you are giving away the end of the process, but nothing (or little) of the struggle it contains may be apparent to the audience. That's why I like very much field sketches and unfinished pictures – I like to see the processes of the artist. Well-elaborated paintings have more appeal for the clients and audience, but sometimes hide a lot of eraser work. I never use an eraser on my sketch book: what it is a mistake to my eyes today could be a happy finding tomorrow.

Nick Derry

I liken the processes involved in creating a picture as a way of leaving a starting point and heading towards an unknown destination. Many paths are available, shortcuts to be found, fascinating and surprising diversions to explore and the end of the journey is neither always clear nor easy to find.

The starting point is simple, I see something I like in nature, something that inspires, and I sketch it. From there onwards the ‘journey’ is open. Sometimes the sketches need only be remade on a larger scale and other times the sketches are just individual visual elements from the day, seen separately and needing to be knitted together into a composition.

Once a vague picture is in my head, I can start on my voyage. Often I find there are certain qualities – light, environment, colours or whatever, that attracted me to sketch the event I saw which then affect the methods I use in making the picture. Using mixed media can often make for difficult decisions regarding what to use where, but certain media have advantages in creating certain effects. For instance watercolour creates superb light effects, wax can help create textures, especially when acrylic is applied over it and scraped back; collage can be applied to form a whole new surface to work on even when halfway through a piece, and all media, if poorly applied or overused, can completely ruin a picture.

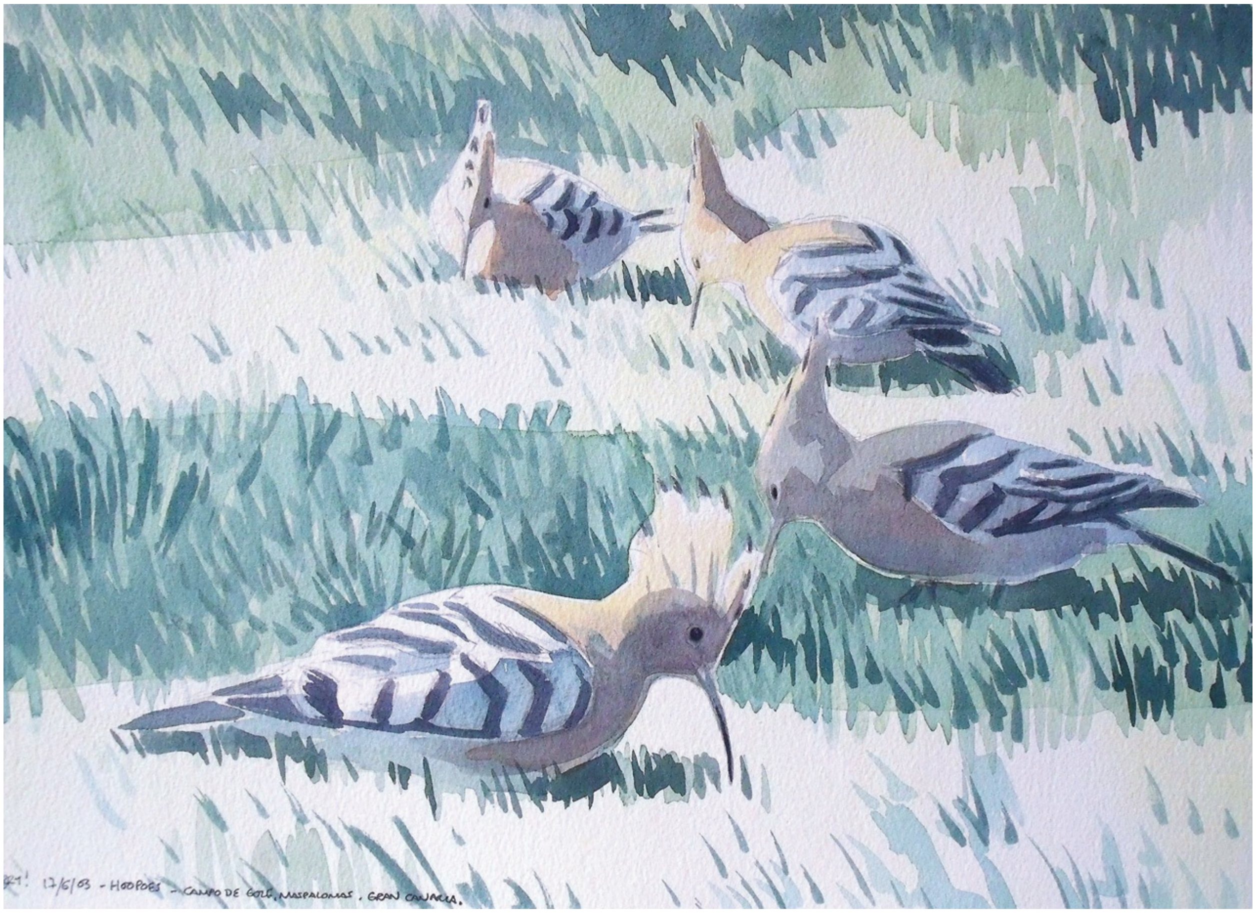


Nick Derry: dunnock and rock buntings (acrylics and collage).

My pictures, as I'm starting to discover, are all about the processes involved; enjoying the journey and discovering where I end up – it's rarely the place I expected to finish! Sometimes I'll work hard to get a picture to look a certain way, only to find it ultimately disappointing, so I'll slap on some more paper to cover the bits I don't like, or I'll wash off as much colour as possible under the shower and start again. It's true to say that I don't consider the materials as particularly important or valuable in the sense that I'm happy to rework any aspect of a piece, even if it may look 'finished'. The amount of detail or quantity of time spent on a picture is irrelevant as far as I'm concerned; a painting's finished when I have nothing meaningful to add to it. And to use the same analogy, if I don't like the destination, I jump back in the car and go somewhere else. Who knows what's around the next corner?

So, there you have it – and it just goes to show;
‘There’s only ONE way of Life; and that’s YOUR OWN!

The Levellers


17/6/03 - HOOPOES - CAMPO DE GOLF, MASPALOMAS, GRAN CANARIA.

Nick Derry: *Hoopoes and Light* (watercolour).

CONTRIBUTING ARTISTS

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Alan Dalton

John Threlfall

Adrian Dancy

Charles Frederick Tunnicliffe

Nick Derry

Esther Tyson

Paschalis Dougalis

Franciscus Van Boxtel

Andrew Ellis

Barry Van Dusen

Angela French

Katrina Van Grouw

Paul Hawkyard

Juan Varela

Debby Kaspari

Mike Woodcock

Ed Keeble

Darren Woodhead

Szabolcs Kokay

Tim Wootton

FURTHER READING

The following is a small selection of publications that I consider to be the finest examples of the portrayal of birds.

Busby, John *Drawing Birds* (A&C Black/RSPB, 2004) Busby, John (ed.) *The Living Birds of Eric Ennion* (Victor Gollancz, 1982) Gillmor, Robert C.F. Tunnicliffe RA: Sketches of Birdlife (Victor Gollancz, 1981) Hill, Martha *The Peerless Eye – the art of Bruno Liljefors* (The Allen Publishing Co Ltd, 1987) Jonsson, Lars *Bird Island* (Croom Helm, 1986)

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